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P I Q U E.

VOL. I.



PIQUE.

By Nobel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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PIQUE.

CHAPTER I.

“Oh, Mildred! I have heard the strangest
a rumour this morning. Is it possible Lord Alresford is expected here to-day?” cried Helen Campbell, hastily flinging open the door of a small exquisitely furnished boudoir, in which her friend was sitting.

Mildred Effingham’s fair face slightly flushed; she looked up from her drawing—a bunch of magnificent geraniums,—and laying down her brush, said rather coldly,—

“You may well be surprised, Helen. When I reached home after our walk yesterday afternoon, I found papa in some consternation awaiting me here, with Lord Alresford’s despatch in his
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hand, which had just arrived by a special messenger."

"And so it is true? I suppose we must make up our minds soon to lose you, Mildred. How desolate dear old Greysdon will appear!" exclaimed Helen with a sigh, divesting herself of her bonnet and cloak, and throwing herself on a low ottoman by Miss Effingham's side.

"Helen, that time is not come!" hastily rejoined Mildred; "do not talk of it: it makes me so miserable to think of quitting you all. How did you learn Lord Alresford's expected arrival? I had just written yonder little note, to beg you to come and spend the morning with me."

"Mamma walked to the Rectory early, and Mrs. Northcote told her she understood the park lodge-keepers had received orders from Lord Elvaston to be upon the look-out, for the Earl was expected to arrive at the Priory about four this afternoon."

Mildred, who knew very well the gossiping propensities of good Mrs. Campbell, could not refrain from smiling.

"And was this all the news Mrs. Campbell gleaned?"

Helen felt slightly puzzled.

"Mrs. Northcote supposed your marriage would not long be delayed, which you know, dear Mildred, under all circumstances, was a very natural conclusion."

"Very!" exclaimed Mildred petulantly; "considering that I have not one feeling, one thought, in common with the man who, to use his own words, hastens to claim me as his bride."

"Is it really so, Mildred? are these indeed your true sentiments?" said Helen, in a tone of grave anxiety.

"Helen, the thought of this marriage makes me utterly wretched. Nay, you must long have known this. During Lord Alresford's absence in Italy, the danger seemed less imminent; but his sudden return and arrival here, quite overpowers me. Read the cool manner in which he announces I must forthwith hold myself prepared to receive him as my future lord and master."

Helen opened the letter which Mildred thrust into her hands, and perused it without comment.

"Oh, Mildred, you must be prejudiced. Surely, judging Lord Alresford from this letter, you cannot accuse him of presumption; it appears to me perfectly respectful both towards yourself

and Lord Elvaston," cried Helen, folding the letter.

"Towards papa,—yes. Papa thinks there never was such a paragon born into the world as Philip Tollemache!" exclaimed Mildred pettishly, though a bright tear dimmed the lustre of her eye. "But say, my darling, grave counsellor," continued she, throwing her arm lightly round Helen's graceful neck, "where is this marvellous respect to myself, when Lord Alresford has not deigned to notify by a single word or line, his approaching arrival at the Priory to me, who certainly am most concerned in it?"

"Unjust!" exclaimed Helen, kissing the glowing cheek of her friend, and taking the letter from the table, she read: "In conclusion, dear Lord Elvaston, you will be good enough to present my most respectful regards and homage to Miss Effingham, and express my deep regret that she has not considered my two last letters from Florence worthy the honour of a reply"—

"Nay, stop Helen!" exclaimed Mildred, now fairly melting into tears; "it is this calm superiority of manner which cuts me to the quick. What right has Lord Alresford to administer this covert rebuke in a letter to papa? He evidently

despises, and considers me a child, and treats me accordingly."

"No, dearest, though I have never seen Lord Alresford, I am sure he must, and does render homage to a mind and character such as yours: but, Mildred, why did you suffer this foolish misunderstanding to arise, by not answering his lordship's letters?"

"Because I will not submit to be lectured, Helen. Unhappily, I chanced to mention my long ride alone with Colonel Sutherland to the ruins at Fernly. This meeting, as you know, was purely accidental, and as the Colonel was riding the same way as myself, I certainly could not, with any regard to politeness, dismiss him from my side. Well, the *tirade* his lordship chose to write on the impropriety of Miss Effingham making herself so notorious, and hinting that such conduct would be perfectly inadmissible when she attained the sublime dignity of Lady Alresford, was perhaps unequalled. There was a great deal more besides, Helen, which I forget; but I did not choose to submit to such tutelage."

"But, Mildred, will you not suffer remonstrance from the man with whom you are to spend your

future life, and submit to be treated like a reasonable being?"

"Lord Alresford is a great deal too good for me, Helen. I detest these marvels of propriety. Give me instead poor human nature, with all its failings! Would that Lady Catherine Neville, whose transcendent virtue he is always quoting, had been elected for the exalted honour of wearing his coronet and presiding over the surpassing glories of Amesbury Park!" cried Mildred, passionately.

"Lady Catherine Neville! Lord Alresford's ward, is she not?" asked Helen, inquiringly.

"Yes; she is an heiress, and lives at Wardour Court, somewhere near Amesbury. Her father, Lord Willingham, died about a year and a half ago, and made the son of his old friend, the late Lord Alresford, his daughter's guardian."

"I wonder what kind of personage this Lady Catherine is?"

"Do not trouble yourself, Helen; you will not long be in the dark after his lordship's arrival. The Earl brought Lady Catherine over from Italy, and established her at Wardour Court; and, indeed, I should be ungrateful not to acknowledge my full obligations to her ladyship, whose sudden

summons, I verily believe, prevented the solemnization of our marriage six months ago."

"Hush, Mildred, hush! it is positively wrong to indulge in this strain. It is a very long time since you saw Lord Alresford; so perhaps, dearest, you may have formed an erroneous estimate of his character. How long is it?"

"Two years."

"Nay, then, Mildred, it is quite possible you may be mistaken. At our age, two years make a vast change in opinions and sentiments."

Mildred shook her head incredulously.

"You know, Helen, I was quite a child when first betrothed to Philip Tollemache, and had no more choice or interest in the matter than yourself; save, perhaps, a childish feeling of elation on being told I was wife elect to the very handsome young man whom I heard every one around me laud, and who I gazed upon myself with sentiments somewhat akin to awe. His lordship then went abroad for some years, during the which we duly corresponded, and returned to England about two years ago with Lord Willingham and his daughter; and when he visited the Priory, whether he found the contrast too glaring between the virtues of the Lady Catherine and

the faults of his betrothed, certain it is never were couple more unloverlike than ourselves. We did not actually quarrel; but move, speak, laugh as I would, always that calm, dark eye rested upon me. Often I know my conduct must have appeared giddy and undignified; but I was very young, and he ought to have made allowance: besides, I never was born to perform the rôle of a stiff, starched dame, abounding in furbelows, and *bienséances*! Well, Helen, the upshot of the whole matter was, that Lord Alresford after remaining our guest for two months, was suddenly called away to the continent on business; which he took care to state required a very brief term to transact. Nevertheless, from the palazzo of the Willinghams at Florence, he wrote to papa requesting his permission to delay our marriage for another year—and *nous voilà!*”

“But, Mildred, if it were all along your serious intention to fulfil the engagement contracted for you, how very strange not to employ this period, and the advantage you possessed of learning his lordship’s sentiments and wishes, in moulding your habits and tastes to his—which ever must exercise so essential an influence over your future happiness. I cannot understand it!”

"Nay, that was as much his lordship's province as mine," exclaimed Mildred, tossing her beautiful head, though tears glistened in her eyes. "Others, Helen, eagerly proffered that homage which Lord Alresford so studiously withheld!"

Helen Campbell raised her clear eyes inquiringly. Miss Effingham's brow crimsoned.

"Perhaps you will find ere long that all their flattery has not the value of one simple word of commendation spoken by your betrothed, Mildred," replied she, seriously.

"Helen, are you also suddenly become a partisan of the Earl?" exclaimed Mildred, in a tone of pique. "I tell you, I never can love one who exacts so much for himself. I might just as well attempt to endow with vitality one of the glowing flowers on this paper before me, as to raise myself to his standard."

"Then why marry him, Mildred? It would be far more honourable and better principled to decline the engagement at once."

"Oh, could I think myself at liberty so to do! But, Helen, I will tell you the history of it," cried Mildred, earnestly, "and you shall judge. At the time old Lord Elvaston died, which happened when I had attained my tenth year, his

title descended to papa, as you know; but his estates, and amongst them this beautiful old place, reverted to the late Earl of Alresford. Papa and he (as I think I have before told you, Helen) were intimate friends, schoolfellows, and fellow collegians. The Earl was immensely wealthy, and most generously proposed to papa to cede his right to the Elvaston estates, provided the miserable little heiress-presumptive of the title was betrothed to his only son—who had then just, or nearly, attained his majority. Upon this solemn contract and agreement, papa has alone for the last ten years held the right over these estates; and upon its accomplishment, Helen, depends his future tenure. If any objection arises on the part of Lord Alresford, the estates devolve wholly and entirely to papa, in accordance with a deed executed by the late Earl; and—though I acknowledge his lordship to be noble and generous enough to set me free should I demand it—yet, did the violation of the contract proceed from me, I know papa would peremptorily insist on yielding up every acre of the property; and he would be only just, Helen—for even then we should be deeply indebted to the Earl.”

“ My poor Mildred, is there then no escape ? ”

cried Helen, gazing with painful emotion on the flushing cheek of her friend. "Surely Lord Elvaston, who loves you so tenderly ——"

"No, Helen! Nothing could be done, dearest, unless it were the spontaneous act of Lord Alresford to set me free. Think! could I by any deed of mine deliberately exile papa from a home he loves so much? and dear mamma likewise, who is so proud of this beautiful place? Could I drive them both forth in their declining years, to support a peerage on the paltry pittance of a poor commoner?"

"Dear Mildred, do not excite yourself thus!" exclaimed Helen, throwing her arm around her friend's neck, and kissing away the tears on her cheek. "Every one speaks so well of Lord Alresford, that in time you must learn to love him; and, perhaps, even when you see him again, you will be amazed at your present prejudice. I know you have no serious attachment: for I cannot bring myself so to designate your foolish flirtation with Colonel Sutherland."

"Sutherland esteems me as I feel I ought to be appreciated, Helen. Contrast the warmth of his devotion, short as is the time since we first met, with his lordship's cold indifference."

"But surely you would not marry Colonel

Sutherland, even were you free to do so, Mildred! A man who has but his handsome person, and a most surpassing facility in uttering light flatteries and empty nothings, to boast of."

"He loves me—which is more than my affianced husband does!" exclaimed Mildred, vehemently. "However, though I cannot insist on my release from this engagement, I will be no hypocrite; and Lord Alresford shall know full well he is dragging a reluctant bride to the altar!"

At this instant a sharp rap at the door made Helen start to her feet. Mildred raised her head from the sofa-cushion, and hastily dried her tears. In a few seconds the boudoir door opened, and a pretty, coquettish-looking damsel stood on the threshold, twirling between her fingers an artificial branch of splendid scarlet japonica.

"Come in, Aglaë!" exclaimed Miss Effingham.

"Pardon, mesdemoiselles," said Mademoiselle Aglaë, advancing trippingly into the apartment; "but milédi command me to come and see wedder dese flowers be suited to Mademoiselle Effingham's head. Milédi order me to prepare your white silk glacée, mademoiselle, for dis evening, and you are to wear dis wreath also. Ciel! quelle pose gracieuse!" exclaimed the

pretty soubrette, lightly twining the glowing flowers amid Mildred's jetty curls. "Ah! milor sera enchanté ce soir de la beauté de sa belle fiancée! Regardez donc, Mademoiselle Campbell, le corsage de la robe encore orné d'un bouquet de ces fleurs brillantes, mademoiselle sera parfaitement mise!"

"That will do, Aglaë. Take the flowers away. I will wear anything mamma and you arrange, only I cannot be disturbed just now," said Mildred, languidly.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Campbell, quelle joie aujourd'hui pour milédi ———"

"Where is mamma?" interrupted Mildred, impatiently.

"Lady Elvaston is sitting in de salon writing, and I was to give her ladyship's kind loove to you, Miss Campbell, and say, she hope to see you dis evening at dinner. Sainte Vierge! comme mademoiselle aura l'air ravissante dans sa robe de noce!" and away Mademoiselle Aglaë was bounding, when she suddenly stopped short, and returned. "Have you any further command for me, mademoiselle? What shall I say to milédi, Miss Campbell?"

"Helen dearest, you must positively come

this evening," whispered Mildred, as she saw her friend hesitate. "You may go, Aglaë, I will give mamma Miss Campbell's answer."

"I wonder wedder his lordship would prefare seeing mademoiselle's hair dress en bandeaux, or in ringlets," murmured Aglaë to herself, surveying artistically Mildred's small head. "Bien mademoiselle, I shall tell her ladyship;" and with a low courtesy the soubrette vanished.

"Helen, I will hear no denial; come you shall this evening."

"But, Mildred, on this first evening of Lord Alresford's arrival, will it not appear rather intrusive if I accept your mamma's kind invitation?"

Miss Effingham laughed.

"Nay, Helen, you will make one only among many similar delinquents. We have a dinner party to-night; though, of course, our guests were all invited before we heard of Lord Alresford's intended arrival. Colonel Sutherland dines here. Dear mamma, when she chose the japonicas for my hair, little dreamed she was selecting the Colonel's favourite flower," cried Mildred, perversely tossing her head, as she stooped and picked from the floor a bud which dropped from the wreath during Aglaë's manipulations.

"Mildred, I conjure you be careful what you do. Depend upon it, Colonel Sutherland's purpose is merely to lure you into an empty flirtation. How unfortunate it so happens he should have been invited to the Priory the very day of Lord Alresford's arrival!"

"If my conduct excites so intolerably his lordship's disapprobation, he had better set me free at once: which certainly would be his wisest plan. By-the-bye, Helen, did you observe, when reading the Earl's letter, that Sir Gerard Baynton accompanies him here on a visit to papa?"

"Yes; I was going to ask about him. Is Sir Gerard a friend of yours, Mildred?"

"No, not exactly a friend; a slight acquaintance only: but I predict, Helen, you will be smitten with the Baronet. He is young, handsome, rich, and does not consider himself quite such a paragon and model as my noble betrothed. Sir Gerard apparently is all lively animation, though I suspect few possess a keener faculty for reading motives and character than he does. He is a most intimate friend of Lord Alresford's: they travelled together a good deal on the continent; and this, you know, dearest, is a sufficient certificate of

kindly nurture. Ah, Helen, how I wish he would fall in love with you!"

"What a vision!" replied Helen Campbell, laughing. "Who would ever dream of Sir Gerard Baynton falling in love with the daughter of the poor curate of Greysdon?"

"Not so impossible!" rejoined Mildred, gazing on Helen's clear, intellectual face, and finely moulded figure. "Sir Gerard ——"

"Mildred! come down here for a few minutes, dear child. Ashford has just brought in some magnificent plants, and I want you to give directions how you will have them placed in the conservatory," exclaimed the soft voice of Lady Elvaston from below.

"In a moment, mamma," cried Miss Effingham, rising and opening the door. "Come, Helen, I am sure your advice will be needed. I shall have no heart in arranging these beautiful exotics for Lord Alresford to gaze upon."

"For shame, Mildred!"

"Come!"

"Indeed, you must excuse me. I promised papa to be at home by half-past three. I have something to do for him this afternoon."

"Well, remember we dine at seven."

"Mildred," whispered Helen, emphatically, as they embraced at the door of the saloon, "I conjure you to consider that, perhaps, the entire happiness of your future life depends on the events of this evening. If you intend to fulfil this engagement, greet Lord Alresford as one whose affection and good opinion you prize."

"Fear not, Helen. I will ponder your counsel," said Miss Effingham, bounding away.

Helen paused a moment, then crossed the hall, and passing through a glass door at its end, proceeded along a path through the garden, and shrubberies leading to the village. She walked on slowly, for there had been much in her brief interview with Miss Effingham to arouse meditation, both intense and painful. She trembled for her friend's happiness. She felt that Mildred was on the verge of keen, and it might be severe trial; for, with all her many admirable and engaging qualities, Helen dreaded the wayward petulance of her character.

Indulged, and idolized by her parents and friends, Mildred Effingham had as yet seen everything, and everybody, save her betrothed, bend to her caprice, and all obstacles to her will vanish

beneath the sunny influence of her smile. Impatient of censure or the slightest control, her spirit, pure, bright, and joyous, roamed at will, and tasted capriciously of all the varied delights, and gifts with which she was surrounded. But, unfortunately for her future peace, this wayward perversity was not the only defect which tarnished a character otherwise noble, and loveable—she lacked also, undeviating candour, and openness of disposition. With the purest, and most righteous intentions, Miss Effingham, even when convinced of the justice, and necessity of any defined course of action, especially if it wounded her *amour propre*, or infringed in the smallest degree on her self-complacency, suffered this irresolution of character to overpower her better judgment. As yet, her life had been so unclouded as to afford little room for its full development; but Helen Campbell, her chosen friend and companion, early detected and grieved over many trifling indications of this grave failing, justly apprehending, that as years rolled on and Mildred was called to lay aside her butterfly existence, and act, it might prove a source of much bitter disquietude.

Early taught, by the universal applause which

everywhere greeted her, to believe her beauty and wit irresistible, and that she was born to carry the world by storm, Mildred found, with feelings of intense pique, and resentment, that, of all her friends, her betrothed husband, Lord Alresford, appeared least sensible of and penetrated with her numerous attractions. Long she pertinaciously resisted the conviction, that he actually presumed to hold up the Lady Catherine Neville as a model in many things worthy of her imitation; but the Earl's terse, conclusive sentences admitted of no misconstruction. Scorning, then, the task of self-examination, and piqued already at his former refusal of her hand, Mildred, with characteristic perversity, obstinately attributed the Earl's insensibility to Lady Catherine's blandishments. Yet, as far as her real knowledge went, this suspicion was reared on very slight foundation. That they had travelled together in Switzerland, and that the Earl spent much of his time in Venice with Lord Willingham, and eulogized Lady Catherine's devotion to her invalid father, formed in reality the sole basis of her secret misgiving.

Mildred had formed her own estimate of the devotion, and deference due to her from her be-

trothed, and she felt mortified that the reality fell so far short of her expectation. Her self-love was wounded, and her awe of him increased. She had yet to learn that perfect mutual confidence must be the bond of the entire devotion she expected, without any definite design of making a corresponding return. Her letters consequently grew colder and fewer, and those she received from the Earl in return were conned with keen, jealous scrutiny. Lord Alresford, since the period of his father's decease, held a high diplomatic post abroad, for which his great talents eminently qualified him: thus unfettered by his restraining presence, Mildred had basked in the sunshine of her home prosperity, banishing, as far as possible, from her mind the thought that her faith and allegiance were pledged to another. Lord and Lady Elvaston, however, keenly felt the indifference their daughter evinced towards the man to whom their own personal and peculiar circumstances had bound her; but, really proud of her alliance with one so distinguished and sought after as Lord Alresford, they lulled themselves in the hope that, on a more intimate acquaintance with the Earl, her repugnance and awe would vanish; while her exquisite loveliness

of person and cultivated mind, they doubted not, must finally captivate and enchain his affection.

This reasonable hope might have been realized, but for one untoward circumstance. While smarting at the contents of a letter from the Earl, not quite so laudatory as she could desire, and containing more reminiscences, past and present, of the Lady Catherine than she deemed needful, Mildred met Colonel Sutherland, the officer in command of the newly-arrived regiment, stationed in the adjoining town of Stanmore, at a grand ball given to celebrate the majority of a baronet, their near neighbour. Fascinated at once by his homage and evident admiration of her beauty and wit, and amused by the ease and brilliancy of his conversation, and his talent for repartee, which kept her own constantly on the *qui vive*, Mildred abandoned herself, without a thought of the consequences, to the daily-increasing pleasure she found in his society. Betrayed by her wayward craving for applause, and the entire appreciation of her numerous attractions, which every act of Colonel Sutherland's soon seemed to bespeak, day after day her sunniest smiles greeted him at the Priory; while, unhappily, Lady Elvaston's better judgment, vanquished by her daughter's perti-

nacious self-will, offered no obstacle to these frequent interviews. Vainly Helen Campbell remonstrated, for invariably Mildred laughingly set aside her scruples; nor, indeed, had she even suspected, until her late interview, the sway Colonel Sutherland's flattery had achieved over her friend's fancy: for still Helen indignantly rejected the notion that Mildred's heart could challenge fellowship with that of a man so shallow, and of such little intrinsic worth.

Absorbed in these reflections, and wondering how Mildred's romance would terminate, Helen wandered on. The walk she had been pursuing was that by which the family at the Priory reached the village church, and the gate at the end of the shrubbery opened into the churchyard. Mr. Campbell inhabited a very pretty rural house, looking down on the church, with a sloping garden, separated from the churchyard by a deep sunk fence. The taste and industry of Mrs. Campbell had converted her dwelling into a bower of sweets, and garlands of bright blossoms clustered round the windows and porch, mingling with vigorous shoots of ivy, which at this early season of the year put forth its leaves of most brilliant green.

As Helen entered the garden, Mrs. Campbell, who was sitting in the verandah close to the dining-room window, which opened on the lawn, laid down her work, and advanced to meet her. Helen at once perceived, by the pleased, important expression of her face, that her mother was in one of the most felicitous moods, and wondering what fresh news she had heard, hastened forwards; as the declining afternoon sun warned her she had not much time to devote to her father's service, before the important process of dressing for the Priory dinner-party commenced.

CHAPTER II.

"So, I understand, Helen, Lord Alresford brings his friend Sir Gerard Baynton down with him to-day," exclaimed Mrs. Campbell, when her daughter came within hail.

"Yes, mamma, both Sir Gerard and the Earl arrive this afternoon," replied Helen.

"I accidentally met Mrs. Slater, the house-keeper, two or three hours ago, and staid to have a chat with her in Mill Lane. She was returning from Farmer Deak's, and had been to desire him to send four chickens daily up to the Priory until further orders. I heard all the news; and of course you know there is to be a large party there to-night: Mrs. Wedderbourne and her niece, the Tennysons, Mr. Northcote, and of all men in the world, Colonel Sutherland! It does

surprise me a man, with Lord Elvaston's nice sense of honour and propriety, should tolerate the foolish flirtation which has been going on these last six months between the Colonel and his daughter; and still more, that the former should be invited to meet Lord Alresford," said Mrs. Campbell running on, with her usual volubility.

"You forget, mamma, that all these guests were invited before Lord Elvaston knew of the Earl's arrival."

"Possibly. But then he should devise any excuse, rather than compel his daughter's betrothed husband to associate with a man whose conduct has rendered her notorious all over the county. My dear Helen, you really ought to give Mildred a hint upon the subject: even that busy Miss Jenks intimated to me this morning that it was rumoured throughout the village, Miss Effingham would have been as well pleased had his lordship prolonged his continental tour."

"Oh, who would listen to an old gossip like Miss Jenks? I am sure Mildred meant nothing dishonourable towards her future *caro sposo*," cried Colin Campbell, a fine spirited boy, firing up when he heard his mother's censure on the conduct of his favourite Mildred. "Sutherland is a

fine, handsome fellow, and deserves a pretty wife. But, Helen, are you not going to the Priory this evening?"

"Yes. Lady Elvaston was good enough to ask me, and as I knew of no particular objection, I promised, at Mildred's request, to go."

"Of course: you did perfectly right, Helen," said Mrs. Campbell, with a well-pleased expression of countenance. "I should have wondered much had you not been asked. Mrs. Northcote said she supposed you would."

"I am very glad to go. Dear Mildred! I feel extremely anxious to see the man to whom it appears her destiny soon to be united; but I do so regret that Colonel Sutherland is to be at the Priory to-night. 'Tis, indeed, a very unpropitious commencement of the Earl's visit," said Helen, anxiously.

"If the Colonel could but divine your uneasiness, Helen, and would tumble off his horse, break his neck, or, in fact, do just anything to prevent him taking his seat at the Priory table, I should pronounce him a capital accommodating fellow. But, my dear, darling little Helen, you may spare your anxiety; for 'tis quite clear to me his dignified lordship may save himself the trouble

of posting down, and setting our quiet village in an uproar: Sutherland has already won the prize," exclaimed Colin Campbell, laughing.

"Nay, Colin, do not jest," replied Helen, seriously. "I feel convinced, from all I have heard this morning, that Mildred within the next three months will become Lady Alresford."

"Then 'tis a monstrous shame, if she does not like the Earl—that's all I have to say on the subject," exclaimed Colin, indignantly.

"That Colonel Sutherland's intentions were never serious, I have quite concluded; and, indeed, Mrs. Northcote did once say, she heard it was reported in the regiment, that he had long been engaged to Miss Conway, Lord Normanton's sister. Nothing can excuse his marked attention to Mildred, save a knowledge of her long engagement; which he pleased to suppose rendered his extravagant homage harmless. I shall take care and ascertain to-night whether he really knows of it; and if not, I will assuredly point out the deep injury his continued attention will inflict," said Helen, resolutely.

"I wish I were going with you, Helen. How you will enjoy yourself: dear Lady Elvaston is so kind!" exclaimed Henrietta Campbell, a girl

of fifteen, looking up from her book, over which she had been poring an hour or more.

"Nonsense, child! mind your book,"—said Mrs. Campbell, sharply, suddenly rousing from a fit of musing, in which she had indulged during the last ten minutes. "I suppose Sir Gerard Baynton is not married, Helen?"

"Oh, no, mamma! Sir Gerard is still a gay, fascinating young cavalier; rich, handsome, and, as Mademoiselle Aglaë would express it,—*un parti inexcéptionable*," replied Helen, carelessly.

"The Chantry is a fine old mansion, not very distant from Amesbury Park; which, I suppose, explains the intimacy between Sir Gerard and Lord Alresford. Sir Gerard's mother, Lady Emily Baynton, was one of the kindest friends of my early days. Your father's first curacy after we married was the village of Weldon, and when we quitted it Sir Gerard had grown a fine spirited boy of twelve years old. I suppose we shall frequently see him here during his visit at the Priory; though, probably, Helen, you will spend some time with your friend there before her marriage,—should it ever ripen into one."

Helen smiled.

"Perhaps," replied she. "But where is

Archy? He was to have worked with me at those papers I promised to transcribe for papa this afternoon. Colin, you may as well help, for time glides away so quickly, and seven is the Priory dinner-hour."

"Archibald is gone to Stanmore to consult Colonel Sutherland about the purchase of a horse. But come along, Helen, I am quite at your service," said Colin, throwing aside his book.

"Helen, my dear, never mind those troublesome papers this afternoon," cried Mrs. Campbell, earnestly. "I feel certain your father will not want them for some days hence. Stooping will make your head ache ——"

"And your nose red, Helen! I advise you to weigh well the tremendous consequences of appearing in such a plight before two mighty potentates like Lord Alresford and Sir Gerard Baynton," cried Colin, laughing, as he followed his sister out of the room.

Mrs. Campbell sat silently and intently plying her needle. Henrietta having at length accomplished her task closed the book, and drawing forwards a low stool, took her work and seated herself opposite to her mother by the side of the open window; and, carefully abstaining from the

slightest movement likely to dispel the train of thought she knew the former loved to indulge, quietly beguiled the time with her stitches, every now and then wistfully gazing on the fragrant flower-beds in the garden beyond.

“ Really, Henrietta, you quite exhaust my patience! Look where the cat has dragged your beautiful bright wool,” exclaimed Mrs. Campbell, suddenly looking up, and directing her young daughter’s attention to the gambols of a fine Persian cat with her ball of amber worsted, which she had suffered to roll from her knee. “ This is so like one of your careless tricks, after your sister’s trouble in selecting the wools for you! You cannot fancy that Mildred, for whom you destine this little souvenir, will prize a dirty, faded cushion. Come hither, child! I see the stitch is wrong. You always will persist in dragging the thread four times through the loops. Fetch the ball, and put it in your apron pocket. Now give me the crotchet-hook, and look!”

Henrietta made no reply; but after obeying her mother’s directions, quietly reseated herself, and applied with renewed assiduity to her work.

Mrs. Campbell also relapsed into silence, and

continued her stitching with the utmost vigour. A quarter of an hour thus elapsed.

"I wonder whether Mrs. Daws has sent home Helen's silk dress?" at length said she; "Henrietta, perhaps you can tell me?"

"I don't know, mamma; but I fancy when Helen and I were walking yesterday, and met Mrs. Daws, she apologized for not being able to send the dress home until next week, on account of having had mourning to make."

"That is her invariable practice," grumbled Mrs. Campbell. "Milliners, when they have been negligent in attending to one's orders, always excuse themselves on the plea of having had mourning to make, which could not by any possibility be delayed. I shall assuredly send a message to Daws this evening. I like people to be punctual. Ah! I see your brother is returned from Stanmore. I must go and hear how he succeeded with the Colonel, and also hurry Helen, for it is nearly six o'clock," said Mrs. Campbell, rising from her chair, as her eldest son Archibald passed by the window on his way to the stable.

For a moment Henrietta let fall her work, and leaning forwards watched her mother's quick step across the garden. Occasionally Mrs. Campbell

paused in her progress to pick up a truant leaf or straw, or to tie up the drooping blossoms of some favourite flower: accidents her quick eye instantly detected, and her hand as speedily rectified, for it was one of her maxims never to defer to a future hour what might easily be accomplished in the present; besides which, she had no idea that a walk, circumscribed even as one through the length and breadth of her own domain, although with a definite object at its end, should be profitless, or unmarked *en passant* by any instance of that restless activity at once the business, and delight of her life.

Mrs. Campbell was renowned throughout the neighbourhood for the notable government of her household, over which, in all things, she ruled with undivided sway; as the mild, studious habits of Mr. Campbell made him, on every occasion, carefully abstain from interference with her projects, or from provoking the overwhelming flood of argument which she always poured out in their defence. Besides the well-being of her household, the future prospects of her children were ever subjects of Mrs. Campbell's unceasing contemplation. The village of Greysdon was situated in the very heart of what is emphatically

termed "a good neighbourhood"; and though the Campbells held a rank which usually, from straitened means and other causes, debarb much social intercourse with the surrounding magnates, such was not their case, as Mr. Campbell's fortune was easy, if not comparatively affluent, independent of his profession. Besides which, it was generally known he had had several times the opportunity of rising to the ranks of the beneficed clergy; but his attachment to Greysdon, and its venerable Rector, ever influenced to induce him to decline any such overtures: a decision his managing wife cordially approved, as she had good grounds for feeling a tolerable degree of certainty, that, on the decease of Mr. Northcote, it was the intention of Lord Elvaston, the patron of the living of Greysdon, to appoint her husband his successor. The powerful patronage of Lady Elvaston also not a little contributed to the almost universal popularity of the Campbells. Helen's pure, thoughtful mind and gentle manners wrought upon Lady Elvaston irresistibly; while the simple, yet truthful tone of her conversation, her unswerving avoidance of flattery and all undue *empressment* to win favour and notice, were charms Mildred Effingham never could withstand; and she invariably

turned with feelings of renewed delight and relief to Helen's society, after companionship with most of the young ladies in the neighbourhood whose pretensions were more on a level with her own. From the days, then, when Helen returned home from school for the holidays, and with feelings and demeanor half shy, half curious, though always self-possessed, paid her weekly visit to the school-room of Lord Elvaston's young heiress, their attachment had gradually grown, and strengthened itself, until, at the period when our history begins, it was cordial, and familiar as that of sisters.

The Campbells' nearest county neighbours, next to Lord Elvaston's family, were the Tennysons of Settringham. Sir Richard Tennyson had just attained his majority, and inhabited the family mansion with his mother and sister. With a large fortune at his disposal, Sir Richard plunged with youthful ardour into the dissipated society amidst which evil chance, no less than inclination, led him. With no restraining hand to guide him in his choice of companions, his jovial college friends expounded, and contrived to inspire him with a deeper veneration for the mysteries of the chase, than for all the lore of Alma Mater. On attaining his majority, therefore, he became master of

the M——shire hunt, and for six months of the year his table was crowded with sporting colleagues—a society anything but improving to his young sister; while he contrived to get through the remainder of the year by horse-racing, rowing, &c.; at intervals, also, most obligingly risking his own neck, and that of any good-natured friend, by occasional displays of prowess as a first-rate whip. Though Mrs. Campbell knew that hitherto dogs and horses were the charms, and sporting the object of Sir Richard Tennyson's life, she had been worldly enough, some time previous to the commencement of our story, to scheme the capture of the Baronet's hand for her daughter; especially as at one period Helen appeared the object of his unbounded admiration. This design she was, however, at length compelled reluctantly to forego, on account of Helen's unconquerable opposition, and Lady Elvaston's marked disapproval; for without the latter's co-operation, she could scarcely hope to achieve the ambitious project. To get Helen speedily, and if possible, grandly married, was the aim of her life; for impetuous and excitable as was Mrs. Campbell, her mind was not so fitful and shallow, as her actions would often denote, and the troublesome consci-

ousness would often intrude, whenever she allowed herself to think, that her daughter, not only by her close intimacy with Miss Effingham, but by the society this privilege entailed, was elevated out of her natural station in life; and her solicitude was painfully aroused for the reaction which might afterwards ensue in Helen's mind, should she fail to fix herself as a permanent star in her friend's sphere. In fancy, Mrs. Campbell, with a mother's anxiety, realized the discontent and secret disgust which probably would arise even in a mind well poised as Helen's, when lack of that potent passport to consideration—riches, should one day banish the luxury, refinement, and glitter of life, in which she at present so largely partook with her friend. Sir Gerard Baynton's visit, however, dispelled for the present these unpleasant forebodings. Many instances of his boyish partiality for Helen were recalled, and carefully pondered over; and even in Mrs. Campbell's brief walk down the garden, to judge by the unwonted animation of her countenance, imagination clothed her visions in brightest hues. Luckily, what Mrs. Campbell dreamed for the moment, she devoutly believed would come to pass; and as her mind assumed a corresponding

serenity, curiously enough, her endless *chateaux en Espagne* added not a little to the tranquillity of her household.

But to return from our digression.—Henrietta still sat at her work, when her sister, arrayed for her expedition, looking fresh and blooming as a rose, entered the room. Presently Mrs. Campbell's hurried step was heard in the passage.

"Helen, what have you got to fasten your berthe with in front, child? Ah, I see you are ready," cried she, hastily opening the door. "Your dress is very becoming," continued Mrs. Campbell, complacently; "where did you get these beautiful flowers from?"

"Archy begged them somewhere during his ride this morning," replied Helen.

"I suppose from old Mrs. Wedderbourne; for he took Dornton on his road from Stanmore. Archy is gone to bring round the ponies, Helen, and intends to drive you to the Priory. Oh, here he comes," cried she, going to the window. "Archibald, let Sam hold the ponies, and come here a moment. I want him to tell you, dear, what Colonel Sutherland hinted about Miss Effingham. Tell your sister what the Colonel said respecting the Priory marriage, Archy," ex-

claimed Mrs. Campbell, as her son entered the room.

"Oh, mother, nothing very important. He supposed only that the long delayed match would soon come off; thought Mildred would make a most fascinating peeress, and inquired whether Alresford was jealous."

"Then he knew of her long engagement," exclaimed Helen, reddening.

"Under all these nonchalant queries, however, I could detect a deep vein of melancholy. I am convinced Sutherland feels keenly his altered position: and I wonder who the deuce would not, after being smiled upon by such a seraph as Mildred," rejoined Archibald Campbell, warmly.

Mrs. Campbell shook her head sagaciously.

"We shall see! I cannot imagine his magnificent lordship arm in arm with a coquette of a wife."

"Come, Helen, unless you mean to fast to-day, we had better set off. The Earl's travelling chariot entered the Bingley lodge-gate, as I passed two hours ago. Are you well wrapped up?"

"Fit to encounter the biting frosts of Siberia," exclaimed Helen, laughing gaily as she stepped into the carriage.

"Make my kind remembrances to Sir Gerard Baynton, Helen, and say what pleasure it will give me to renew my acquaintance with him," screamed Mrs. Campbell as the carriage whirled away.

CHAPTER III.

AT a quarter past six precisely, the modest equipage of the curate of Greysdon passed the Priory gates. As they drove through the beautiful park towards the mansion, Helen unconsciously sank into a deep fit of abstraction. She felt uncomfortable : her heart misgave her, and all her anxiety and painful forebodings for Mildred returned in full force. Archibald laughingly rallied her several times on her gravity, and vowed she was meditating how, syren-like, to lure some hapless victim to destruction under the potent fascination of her treacherous spells. Helen smiled, but her gaiety did not revive ; and her brother vainly continued his banter, until they drew up before the door of the mansion.

Helen lightly sprang from the carriage, and stood a moment under the porch.

“ You need not expect to see me again much

before midnight," exclaimed Archibald, gathering up the reins. "Look, here are some of Lord Elvaston's guests arriving," added he, directing Helen's attention to a low phaeton emerging from one of the park drives. "No; 'tis Lord Elvaston himself, and another gentleman! God bless you, my dear Helen: do not let these fine people turn your little head!"

Helen nodded saucily, then bounded across the hall and up the staircase, and hurried along, without encountering any one, towards Miss Effingham's dressing-room.

Just at the door, she met Aglaë.

"Ah! c'est vous, Mademoiselle Campbell. Miss Effingham desire me to wait here to see wedder I can be of sarvice to you."

"Where is Miss Effingham?" asked Helen, entering the room.

"Miss Effingham wish much to wait for you; but milédi came and fetch her about tree quarters of an hour since. Mais donc vous êtes charmante, mademoiselle!" continued Aglaë, carefully divesting Helen of her numerous wrappers. "Sit down, please, and let me arrange your hair a leetle! Oh, milor est si beau! Very much more handsome than monsieur le colonel; il a

un si noble démarche,—mademoiselle doit être très heureuse! Permettez que je tire cette boude—ah! that is it,—c'est parfaite!"

"Well, Aglaë, tell me, at what o'clock did Lord Alresford arrive?" asked Helen, approaching Mildred's luxurious toilette.

"His lordship arrive at about half-past tree."

"And was Miss Effingham in the saloon?"

"No; soon after you did leave, mademoiselle was seized with a most dreadful mal de tête, looked so excessively pale and défaite, that even milédi advise her go try and sleep, until it was time to dress. The Earl did stay with madame, talking in de salon, while Sir Gerard went a drive with milord. Ah, Sir Gerard aussi, mademoiselle, a quelque chose ——"

"Well, never mind Sir Gerard, Aglaë. Is Miss Effingham better?" asked Helen, drawing on her gloves.

"Mademoiselle did take a teaspoonful of sal-volatile, which made her better when she rise up about five. She was soon dress, but while I was combing her beautiful hair, she was so morne and silencieuse—I could not understand, avec un si noble fiancé! Milédi presently came, and fetch her away, I tink to her own private room, but a

few minutes afterwards I did see her descend to the salon, conducted by the Earl. Ah, mademoiselle, nous Françaises nous faisons les choses d'une autre façon !”

Helen nearly laughed outright at this pathetic lament, but Aglaë was a favoured and very privileged individual.

“ You laugh, mademoiselle. But I tink it is time now for you to descend. Lady Elvaston say, she would explain why Miss Effingham did not wait ;” —Helen already had divined—“ but you were to enter the salon by de private porte of de boudoir, and she would be there to greet you, as she thought you would not like to make de grand entrée alone. You will do very well, mademoiselle, —votre corsage vous va à ravir, et vos cheveux luisent comme du satin ! Ah, attendez !” cried she, suddenly shutting the door she had opened for Helen's exit, “ attendez ! Sir Gerard is just descending !”

Helen retreated, and waited until she thought Sir Gerard had had time to establish himself comfortably below. She then went down, and with somewhat of a nervous sensation, it must be owned, opened the door of the boudoir and entered. This small apartment communicated by

folding doors with the saloon where the majority of Lord Elvaston's guests were assembled. Lady Elvaston, however, according to her promise, was there; and when Helen appeared, was standing in earnest conversation with a very handsome young man. Helen timidly paused, but in a minute Lady Elvaston came towards her.

"My dear Helen," said she, in her low, soft voice, "I am very glad to see you. Mildred has been anxiously expecting you for some time. I suppose Aglaë delivered our message?"

"Yes. I feel much obliged by your kindness in waiting for me here, dear Lady Elvaston. I trust Mildred is better."

"Yes, she is in the next room talking to Colonel Sutherland; but before we go to her, I must introduce Sir Gerard Baynton. Sir Gerard, allow me to present you to Miss Campbell."

Sir Gerard bowed. Helen curtseyed, and immediately taking Lady Elvaston's arm, passed onwards into the drawing-room.

Just in the doorway they met Lord Elvaston.

"How are you, Helen? glad to see you," said he, good-naturedly. "Hope Mr. and Mrs. Campbell are well: but where is my friend,

Archibald? I fancied I caught a glimpse of him as we returned from our drive."

Helen looked rather embarrassed; for kind-hearted as was Lord Elvaston, he had a strange faculty for always saying things at the wrong time.

"Oh, thank you. I am sure it would have given my brother great pleasure to have accompanied me; but he only returned home from a long ride, just in time to drive me here," replied she.

"Ah, indeed! Archibald is a fine young fellow, and a great favourite of mine. Baynton, had you much shooting in France?" said Lord Elvaston, passing onwards.

"I am sorry you did not bring one of your brothers. In my haste this morning, I forgot to request you to do so," exclaimed Lady Elvaston, pausing an instant. "But look at Mildred! how very perverse of her to appear so monopolised with Colonel Sutherland. Such conduct must excite the Earl's serious displeasure, added to her ungracious reception of him this afternoon."

Miss Effingham sat rather apart on a low couch; but the room was too thronged with guests, to make her position in any degree

remarkable. Never had Helen seen her look more radiantly beautiful. She was reclining nonchalantly on the couch, and her soft cheek flushed as she raised her eyes to the face of Colonel Sutherland; who, at the time Helen entered the room, was talking to her with great *empressement* of manner.

"Does she not look well this evening?" said Lady Elvaston, gazing proudly on her daughter; and then she added in a slight accent of annoyance—"How she can listen to that frivolous, superficial Colonel Sutherland, when she might, and ought to be conversing with Lord Alresford, does astonish me."

"'Tis an infatuation, dear Lady Elvaston, which Mildred's good sense will speedily overcome," replied Helen.

"Ah! but while shadowed by the delusion, she will lose the opportunity of fixing the esteem and attachment of a man, whom any woman might be proud to win. But now, Helen, I will introduce the Earl, and then leave you to make your way as you can amongst all these people," said Lady Elvaston, beckoning to Lord Alresford, who immediately hastened to her side.

Helen eagerly raised her eyes, and after an

earnest gaze, which, brief as it was, called a smile on the Earl's face, inwardly confessed Aglaë's commendations were not overdrawn. Lord Alresford was tall, and his manner and carriage strikingly dignified, and self-possessed. As he approached, she was struck with the calm seriousness resting on his very handsome features, and involuntarily her eyes fell under the quick, penetrating look which met her own. Helen secretly gave Mildred more credit for courageous daring, than she had ever before awarded; for there was a haughty firmness in the expression of his lordship's features, which seemed to defy contradiction. Lady Elvaston went through the accustomed forms of introduction, and then Helen was irresistibly captivated by the graceful bow and fascinating smile, imparting quite an altered expression to his face; though she still firmly believed him capable, when occasion needed, of penning those strict reprimands of which poor Mildred so bitterly complained.

"Miss Effingham has often mentioned Miss Campbell's name, and always in terms of the warmest affection," said Lord Alresford courteously, glancing towards the spot where Mildred sat.

Helen smiled, said a few words in reply, and as Lady Elvaston was summoned at this moment to receive other guests, she passed on to speak to her friend.

"Oh, Helen, I am so glad you are come," cried Mildred, rising hastily, and stepping forwards to meet her. "Aglaë, of course, explained why I did not wait for you. Ah, here come the Tennysons," exclaimed she suddenly, as the door opened. "For Heaven's sake, Helen, sit down quickly by me, or I shall become the victim of Clara's brusqueries. Stay! I see mamma has just introduced Sir Gerard Baynton, so, perhaps, for the present, she will be blind to the position of her dear friend," said Miss Effingham, a disdainful smile curling her beautiful lip as she glanced on the towering figure of Miss Tennyson; who followed her mother and brother into the room, and after exchanging a few words with Lady Elvaston threw herself back on a chair, and turning to Sir Gerard Baynton, who happened to be seated near, commenced a most fluent series of interrogatories.

Sir Gerard at first appeared surprised, but in a few minutes apparently comprehending at once the peculiar characteristics of his fair neighbour, entered with spirit into her humour.

Miss Tennyson's figure was commanding, and moulded on a large scale, and some there might be found who would even have pronounced her handsome, as she sat listening with animated face to Sir Gerard's lively replies. Her complexion was sallow, a defect increased by the yellow tinge cast by the vivid lilac dress she wore, and her hair, and eyes were dark. The expression of her face was too harsh, and *prononcée*, and there was an abruptness in her gestures, and something brusque and imperious in the tone of her voice, the very reverse of feminine; which seldom, on a first introduction, conveyed a flattering idea of her amiability, or gentleness of temper. Her eyebrows were black, and strongly marked; her forehead low, and there was altogether a decided "throw off" in her manners and language, (especially in the coolness with which she uttered and maintained the most outrageous assertions,) that at times, to her intense satisfaction, drew all eyes upon her.

Mildred, with a hasty gesture, took Helen's hand and drew her to a seat beside her.

"Will Miss Campbell allow me to wish her good-evening?" said Colonel Sutherland, as Helen seated herself. "Mr. Archibald Campbell was

over at Stanmore this afternoon. Did you see him before you left home?"

"Yes," replied Helen, in some surprise.

"Then, doubtless, you know of our expedition to Burton's Mews, and that we have nearly purchased for you the little bay mare you admired so much, which Miss Tennyson rode last winter. She is to be sent to Greysdon to-morrow morning on a fortnight's trial. I hope you will still admire her."

"No, indeed; he never told me about it. Dear Archy, how kind and generous!" exclaimed Helen.

"How delightful, Helen," cried Mildred; "we can now ride to Fernly together. I was just proposing some such expedition to Colonel Sutherland." Mildred paused—her colour deepened as she caught the astonished expression of Helen's eye: she continued, however, with a light laugh, turning to the Colonel, "Really, you men have neither tact nor discretion. Could you not perceive, by Helen's ignorance of her brother's expedition, that Mr. Archibald Campbell was preparing a delicate surprise for his sister to-morrow morning, which you have quite frustrated by your indiscreet revelation?"

“ Upon my word, I sincerely beg Miss Campbell’s pardon, and can only marvel at her brother’s fortitude. Had I a sister only half as fair, my heroism would have succumbed, and I should have told all before I had been in her presence ten minutes.”

“ Just what I should have divined,” exclaimed Mildred, laughing. “ For the satisfaction of a momentary impulse, you would pitilessly destroy the more perfect gratification of a future hour. *Tout pour le present, rien pour l’avenir.*”

“ ’Tis a defect, I acknowledge ; but my disposition never suffers me to put restraint on present feelings for the sake of a future brilliant *tout ensemble*. Besides, we men can never hope to equal the exquisite tact and delicacy of women in conferring a favour ; we can but appreciate, and, as a poor acknowledgment, offer devoted homage,” rejoined the Colonel, in a low voice, while his eye rested on the glowing japonicas twined in Mildred’s hair.

Miss Effingham’s cheek flushed, while Helen unconsciously retreated as far as she could towards the end of the sofa.

“ Yes ; but I am persuaded if people would take things literally as they are, without ever

perpetually diving and seeking for hidden meanings and motives, half the misconceptions which daily arise might be averted," observed Mildred, languidly.

" Ah; but if everything were taken *au pied de la lettre*, where would friendship—society—be? You know we are constantly having the disagreeable truth impressed upon us that this is an age of irony and insincere profession. However, at times the world finds me sceptical enough on some subjects: for instance, I sturdily refused until yesterday to give credence to the report that you were engaged to Lord Alresford. His lordship's visit was a very sudden one, was it not?"

" Very."

" I was amazed beyond expression when I heard of the Earl's arrival at the Priory," persisted the Colonel, fixing his eyes earnestly on her face.

" You could not have been more astonished than myself," responded Miss Effingham, haughtily, throwing herself back on the couch.

" Is it possible?"

Helen, who now and then caught a word of this *sotto voce* discourse, was in an agony; she dare scarcely look round. She resolved, how-

ever, to make a desperate effort to put an end to it.

"Mildred!" exclaimed she suddenly, "I want to hear all you know about the grand ball at Dornton Park next month. Archibald called on his road to Stanmore, and found Mrs. Wedderbourne deep in the mysteries of coloured lamps, festoons, and garlands."

"Why, Helen, I never remember your curiosity so strongly excited about a ball before. However, yonder sits Miss Vincent, Mrs. Wedderbourne's niece, talking to Sir Richard Tennyson, and I dare say she will only be too happy to give you every detail after dinner," replied Mildred, recklessly turning again towards the Colonel.

"I have not yet wished that every felicity may attend your union with Lord Alresford, Miss Effingham. May I not congratulate you?" resumed Colonel Sutherland, in a deep, earnest voice.

"Oh, certainly! When a thing is inevitable, it is best policy to take everybody's congratulations in good part, and not pause to analyze one's own feelings too closely," replied Mildred, looking down and commencing a most ruthless attack

on her bouquet. "You remember the old adage, Colonel Sutherland—what cannot be cured—.
Apropos, did you know a cousin of Sir Gerard Baynton's is about to join your regiment?"

Helen's cheeks burned. Meditating a speedy retreat, she gazed uncomfortably around, when, to her unspeakable consternation, she beheld Lord Alresford standing so close behind Mildred that he could scarcely fail to have heard her last observation. She glanced again at her, and beheld her occupied as ever with the Colonel, totally unconscious of the eyes so earnestly bent upon her. Helen arose, and moved towards a table, hoping thus to attract her attention, and took up one of those small, highly-coloured engravings of Swiss scenery, so frequently brought home by tourists for the edification of their untravelled friends.

"This coarsely executed print, Miss Campbell, can give you but a very feeble conception of the sublime beauty of Grindelwald," said Lord Alresford, crossing over to the table near which she stood.

Helen was astonished. She stole a glance at the Earl's face; the expression of his eye was severe, yet a smile hung on his lip, and she mar-

velled at the *insouciance* and self-possession of his language and manner.

"Yes; I feel that the stupendous scenery of Switzerland must be seen to be appreciated," replied she, scarcely knowing what she said, as Lord Alresford took the print from her hands.

"The superfluous waters of the lake on the summit of Grindelwald, flowing down the mountain from this glacier,—stupendous peaks of glistening ice, piled one above another some thirty or forty feet high: I can scarcely describe the dazzling effect of the sun's rays, or the gorgeous hues which sparkle around the towering pyramids as they gradually decrease, and slope to the fertile valley at the base of the mountain. But have you never been abroad, Miss Campbell?"

"Never."

"Ah, I suppose you have been too happy—too content with home, and its endearing ties, to wander in search of foreign adventure." Lord Alresford paused, and then resumed after a brief space. "My Swiss tour furnishes me with more pleasing reminiscences than any of my past years of travel, enhanced as it was by the companionship of Lord Willingham and his accomplished daughter the Lady Catherine Neville."

"Lady Catherine excels in painting and modelling, I understand."

"Yes; her pictures are beautifully finished. She studies daily from a small, but choice gallery of paintings, bequeathed by her father at Warradour. Miss Effingham likewise possesses great talents in this delightful accomplishment, does she not?"

"Have you really never seen any of Mildred's exquisite drawings? I will request her permission to show you her portfolio:—or, perhaps, I had better ask Lady Elvaston," replied Helen, quickly looking round; for she was growing jealous for Mildred's sake.

Lord Alresford made a hasty movement. Helen had not time to ascertain whether it was one of approval or dissent, when dinner was announced; and in a few seconds she found herself traversing the spacious hall, arm in arm with Mr. Northcote, the worthy Rector of Greysdon.

"I do not know what your opinion is, Miss Campbell, but *I* think our affianced appear the reverse of enchanted with each other this evening," said Mr. Northcote, laughingly, in a whisper.

"Mildred is indisposed," replied Helen, evasively.

"Indeed! I protest I never remember seeing her look more blooming than she appears to-night. Between ourselves, Miss Campbell, as a friend of the Elvastons, I regret that chattering blockhead, Sutherland, makes one of our party."

"Hush!" exclaimed Helen, in a voice of entreaty, as they entered the dining room.

"But how comes it I have the honour of handing down so fair a damsel?" said the worthy Rector, as they took their seats at table. "Let me see how Lady Elvaston has disposed of her beaux. I perceive Sir Richard Tennyson has led out my little friend Mildred," continued Mr. Northcote, in a low tone of voice, meant expressly for Helen's ear, "and Sutherland sits next to Clara Tennyson. Humph! they are well matched, and may lead each other a hot chase which shall talk the longest string of nonsense during the hour they are compelled to play the agreeable. Sir Gerard is trying to make out from little simpering Miss Vincent, whether she will eat fish or sip soup; and yonder sits Lord Alresford by the side of our graceful hostess, talking with the utmost vivacity. I am not sure, Helen, which he admires most—the mother, or the daughter. But what will you take?" exclaimed

Mr. Northcote ; his soliloquy being suddenly brought to a close by a servant placing a plate of fish before him.

“ I have finished my soup whilst you have been entertaining me with your observations,” replied Helen, laughingly.

Mr. Northcote continued for some minutes silently to make up for lost time, and Helen, having nothing to divert her attention, leisurely surveyed the party. Her eye first rested on Mildred. She was reclining back in her chair, and her air and manner bespoke haughty indifference, as she replied to Sir Richard Tennyson’s voluble speeches by cold monosyllables : her soft cheek glowed, and there was a restless glitter in her eye, so very opposite to her usual self-possessed demeanour, that Helen was amazed. Mildred’s glance frequently rested on Colonel Sutherland and Miss Tennyson ; who appeared resolved to realize the Rector’s good-humoured badinage, and were talking as if their very existence depended on the present moment ; and then it flitted again from them and centred on Lord Alresford : once their eyes met ; Mildred’s cheek glowed more vividly still, but she immediately turned her head away, and made some short remark to the Baronet.

Helen saw the effort this struggle for self-command cost her, and was right glad when, after another tedious half hour at dessert, Lady Elvaston arose, and with her lady guests retired.

Miss Effingham, however, on quitting the dining-room seemed resolved not to interchange a word with her friend; but linking her arm through Miss Vincent's, proceeded towards the conservatory.

"How delightfully cool and refreshing this place is! I do so detest dinner-parties!" exclaimed she, almost pettishly, stooping to inhale the fragrance of a magnificent Cape jessamine.

"Do you? I think it all depends upon one's neighbours," replied Miss Vincent, slightly colouring.

"I hope yours this evening proved themselves agreeable?" asked Mildred quickly, fixing her large earnest eyes on Miss Vincent's face.

"Oh, yes; Colonel Sutherland always contrives to make himself agreeable. But do you know I really felt for him to-day, for we all know how much he admires you, Mildred."

"Does he? Perhaps he admires the Priory entertainments as much, or more."

"Possibly; men of the present age are so insincere. Did you ever hear the strange report,

that Colonel Sutherland is engaged to marry one of the Miss Conways? I do not hesitate to repeat this now to you, Mildred, as of course your flirtation with him never could have been serious."

Miss Effingham's brow flushed.

"Colonel Sutherland could scarcely have been so long in this neighbourhood, partaking of our hospitality, without avowing an engagement every way so honourable to him as one with Lord Normanton's sister," replied she, after a momentary pause.

"Nay," rejoined Miss Vincent, shaking her little ringleted head, "we were none of us so violently *éprise* as to render this step absolutely necessary. But what a fine, noble looking man the Earl of Alresford is. You must suffer me to congratulate you, Mildred. Amesbury Park is such a magnificent old place, likewise. Aunt Wedderbourne went over the gardens last year, on her return from Hastings, and she says, in her opinion, Windsor Castle could scarcely compete with it. Ah, Mildred! you will throw us all aside with your wreath of orange-flowers to bind a Countess's coronet on your brow. What a splendid *avenir* is opening for you!"

"Very," exclaimed Mildred, turning away her

head to hide the tears which gathered in her eyes.

"By-the-bye, don't you think this brilliant yellow acacia would make lovely festoons for the boudoir at Dornton on the night of our ball? I must persuade aunt to adopt it," cried Miss Vincent, pausing, and affectedly gathering a few tufts from the clusters of flowers spreading like a sheet of amber over the prickly foliage. "Is Lord Alresford habitually so grave and haughty in his manner, Mildred? I am certain I never should find courage to gainsay or contradict him in the slightest matter: but you have a more daring spirit than I am possessed of. Apropos, I want to ask you who a Lady Catherine Neville is, whom his Lordship talked so much about at dinner with Lady Elvaston? He seemed most enthusiastic in her praise. Did you ever hear of her?"

"Certainly: Lady Catherine is the only child of the late Lord Willingham, and a ward of the Earl's," replied Mildred, hurriedly. "But here come Helen and Miss Tennyson, so we will take possession of this low couch, and you must tell us all about the preparations for your aunt's ball; who have received invitations: in

short, every particular," exclaimed she, drawing the couch to the inner door of the conservatory, so as to command a view all over the drawing-room. "I fear, Caroline, you will feel a draught from that open window. Had I not better close it?"

"Pray do not for me. The evening breeze is most delicious, wafting towards us the odour of these fragrant parterres!" exclaimed Miss Vincent, affectedly. "How beautifully Aglaë makes Miss Effingham's dresses!" added she, turning to Helen, as Mildred, heedless of her disclaimer, quietly proceeded to close the slide.

The cords of the pulley appeared, however, entangled; for Mildred, after trying vainly for a few moments, eagerly beckoned to Helen.

Miss Campbell was at her side instantly.

"Helen," whispered she, while her lip quivered, "if you love me, talk to those girls and let them leave me in peace!" and Mildred hastily closed the window, and took a seat on the sofa between Miss Tennyson and Miss Vincent.

In Miss Tennyson, the latter found a very attentive auditor to her elaborate detail of the preparations for the much-talked-of ball. Miss Vincent was one of those young ladies who would

consider existence a blank, and their colloquial powers at a very low ebb, but for the occasional excitement of some such stirring event. It was, nevertheless, perfectly wonderful to hear Miss Vincent descant on the colour of a ribbon, or the shape of a pin-cushion; and the copiousness of her expletives on the interesting subject challenged a tribute to her ingenuity, if not to her persuasive powers. In a word, her mornings were wasted in frivolous trifles, which she put forth her best eloquence to prove the contrary, and her evenings in sentimental languishing; which she fancied gave signal proof of intellectual superiority. Her person corresponded with her character: her stature was low, and her complexion of that statue-like, sickly whiteness, which always conveys the impression of failing health; her eyes were large, long, and of pale blue colour,—cold, and unmeaning in their expression, yet pronounced pretty by those who care only for shape and regularity of feature. There was no warmth in her smile, no soul in her face: her small, well cut lips revelled not in richness of hue, and when drawn tightly together, as was frequently the case, imparted an aspect of listless discontent to her features: the only expression of

which they seemed capable. Her hair was the sole natural ornament Miss Vincent might fearlessly claim : it floated round her face in a profusion of luxuriant ringlets of that pale golden colour so very uncommon ; but we are compelled to confess, that although nature had thus adorned her with tresses of a hue which generally harmonizes so well with the fresh blooming tints of youth, yet in Miss Vincent they enhanced alone the colourless insipidity of her countenance.

As Miss Vincent proceeded in her narrative, Helen occasionally threw in a few words ; but Mildred, under pretence of a violent headache, sat back and said nothing. Many significant glances passed between the two young ladies, and their conversation began rapidly to subside ; but at length the drawing-room door opened and the gentlemen entered. Mildred started up, and passing into the room, commenced a most animated attack upon poor old Lady Tennyson ; who, for lack of some such impetus, had been composing herself gradually down into a comfortable doze : for Lady Elvaston, during this eventful evening, was too preoccupied to entertain her guests with her wanted vivacity. Lord Alresford quietly continued his conversation with

Mr. Northcote, and did not even turn his eyes as Mildred's graceful figure floated by.

"I am sorry, ladies, to be obliged to announce the defection of one of our cavaliers," said Lord Elvaston. "Colonel Sutherland is obliged to return early to prepare a report for the Commissioners, who are coming down to investigate a charge at the barracks to-morrow."

"What! has Sutherland got into a scrape?" asked Sir Richard Tennyson.

"Something of the kind: but I don't know the particulars. However, he takes it marvellously easy, so I suppose 'tis nothing very serious," replied Lord Elvaston carelessly, setting down his coffee-cup on the table.

"The inquiry is into the conduct of young Blakesley; nothing at all affecting Colonel Sutherland," interposed Lady Tennyson, now fairly awake. "By-the-bye, Miss Effingham," continued she, rather maliciously, "Dick hears the regiment is ordered from Stanmore to some horrid place in the north. The Colonel is such a universal favourite, that I am sure there are many ladies, both old and young, in this neighbourhood who will wear the willow on his departure. Do you not think so?"

Mildred's beautiful brow slightly contracted.

"Colonel Sutherland is good-natured and lively, therefore we shall all be sorry to lose his society; though of course you will especially feel it, Lady Tennyson, as he is so frequent a guest at Settringham," hastily interposed Lady Elvaston: for at a glance she discovered that Lord Alresford, though now seemingly occupied with a volume of engravings, attentively watched Mildred's deportment.

"Yes," rejoined Lady Tennyson; "Dick has taken a monstrous fancy to the Colonel, and is always inviting him to Settringham, much oftener than either I or Clara approve. My daughter always declares the Colonel to be a strange compound of folly and affectation, and I perfectly agree with her."

This was more than Mildred could stand.

"You do, indeed, astonish me, Lady Tennyson," rejoined she, with a touch of petulance in her tone and manner; "and though of course I am far from claiming a discernment profound as Miss Tennyson's, I must confess I have always found Colonel Sutherland most entertaining and agreeable."

Lady Tennyson thought the tone of this retort

rather peremptory ; but, as Mildred was a countess elect, she made no reply.

“ Do you think Clara would favour us with one of her songs ? ” asked Mildred, after a short pause in her usual sweet, gracious tones. “ I think I see her music yonder—would your lordship be kind enough to give it to me ? ” added she, addressing Lord Alresford.

The Earl silently laid it before her.

“ What a very handsome, distinguished-looking man Lord Alresford is ! My dear, I beg to congratulate you on your conquest,” whispered Lady Tennyson, loud enough for the Earl to catch distinctly every syllable she uttered.

Sir Gerard Baynton, meanwhile, made his way to Helen’s side.

“ Well, Miss Campbell, I must protest that your greeting of an old friend and acquaintance is excessively cool and distant,” said he, seating himself by her. “ Let me see, ’tis twelve years since we met ; but then we were capital friends, and I think our last notable exploit together at Weldon, lured by a tempting field of blooming cowslips, was to wade across the little rivulet at the bottom of the park. Do you remember those happy old days ? ”

"Oh, yes; and this, and a great many other mischievous exploits likewise," cried Helen, laughing and blushing.

"Imagine, then, my disappointment, on returning from Eton again at the holidays, to find my little playfellow flown; and I never hear more of her until after the lapse of a dozen years—when, on a visit to Lord Elvaston, the door suddenly opens, and I am introduced to a very demure, serious young lady, who turns out to be my former faithful ally Helen Campbell, but who now will scarcely acknowledge me."

"Really, Sir Gerard, your case is most pitiable."

"When Lady Elvaston assured me of your identity, I felt most aggrieved. But how is Mrs. Campbell? I have a vivid recollection of her goodnatured indulgence of the freaks of a wild schoolboy."

"Mamma is quite well, I thank you."

"And Mr. Campbell, and Archibald? I certainly intend to go and renew my acquaintance with them all to-morrow: but I hear you have now several more brothers and sisters."

"Only another brother and sister—Colin and

Henrietta. Mamma often speaks of Lady Emily Baynton. I hope she is well?"

"My mother? Yes, I am thankful to say, she is quite well. She is still residing at the Chantry: for you know, Miss Campbell, for some years past I have been an inveterate wanderer; and although I fear she must often find it very lonely, yet I am selfish enough to implore her to remain. I could not endure the thought of the place being deserted or neglected."

"Indeed, I do not wonder. I remember, child as I was, when we removed from Weldon, the vision of its lawns and magnificent woods haunted me long afterwards, contrasted with the very flat, ugly country in which our new abode was situated."

"I trust we shall soon see you again in our neighbourhood, for Amesbury Park is only about three miles from the Chantry. When Lady Alresford is installed there, we shall have most abundant material for forming a delightful society. I do not think she will complain of being dull when she comes to reside amongst us; for all absent people, in dutiful consideration, are returning to their homes. The famous Vernon suit has terminated in Turville's favour, and he is coming

to take immediate possession of Nethercote. Lady Normanton and her daughters live at Moreton Place. Do you remember the Conways, Miss Campbell?"

"I have a slight, though very slight, recollection of having seen them at the Chauntry, at one of Lady Emily's juvenile fêtes."

"They are very near neighbours of ours, and Miss Conway is an especial favourite of my mother's. Poor girl! I fear she has not a very happy home."

"I have always understood that Lady Normanton has a capricious and violent temper."

"Yes; and poor Maude, because she is amiable, and has a most angelic disposition, bears all the burden of her ladyship's ill-humour. Her sister Isabella is beautiful, unfeeling; and, as I have watched her closely, I do not think I should be using too strong a term were I to add *méchante* also."

"You are severe, Sir Gerard. I shall begin to be quite afraid of you," cried Helen, playfully holding up her fan. "Now, seriously, I want to ask you a question:—did you ever hear it reported that Miss Conway is engaged to marry Colonel Sutherland?"

"Now you mention it, I certainly have heard such a report; but I should think it utterly impossible, from what I know of Maude Conway's character, that she could so honour the personage we have met here to-day. There are several totally distinct families which bear the name of Sutherland."

"You think so?"

Helen, nevertheless, still persisted in her secret belief that Colonel Sutherland was Miss Conway's fiancé. She next turned to a subject which gave her as much anxiety as the Colonel's engagement.

"You have not mentioned the Lady Catherine Neville. Does she not reside somewhere in your neighbourhood?"

"Yes, at Wardour Court, a fine old mansion five miles from Amesbury."

"Lady Catherine, I understand, has just returned from a long residence abroad. Of course, being Lord Alresford's ward, she must be a friend of yours, Sir Gerard; therefore, pray include her in your sketch of Mildred's future neighbours."

"You are curious, Miss Campbell, I suppose, because she is Alresford's ward," replied Sir Gerard, laughing; "but I assure you she bears most reverential respect to her guardian; for 'tis

impossible to be intimately acquainted with Alresford without feeling one's own inferiority in most things. Lady Catherine is beautiful, accomplished, and I have seen few women equally graceful and fascinating. Perhaps you know she is an orphan. Lord Willingham died a few months ago, and left her heiress of his immense estates. Wardour Court, as you will ere long acknowledge, is just the sort of place, with its dark woods, quaint gables, and gothic windows, for a being of Lady Catherine's enthusiastic temperament to inhabit."

"You have now effectually excited my interest and curiosity, Sir Gerard. Tell me what are her pursuits? Does she visit a great deal?"

"The Conways are her chief friends; though I cannot fancy much congeniality between them—Maude Conway excepted. She often visits my mother; but she has never recovered the shock of Lord Willingham's death, and I understand at times her spirits are so depressed as to occasion great anxiety to Alresford, and indeed to all her friends. But really, Miss Campbell, you have lured me step by step, until I am becoming quite scandalous."

Helen longed to inquire a little more into Lady

Catherine's history, and especially on her relations with the Earl. She sat meditating upon what she had heard, until Sir Gerard drew her attention to Mildred, who was flitting from one young lady to another, in the hope of gaining a recruit for the piano; Miss Tennyson having obligingly exhausted her supply of songs.

"How beautiful Miss Effingham is!—but how restless and excited she appears to-night!" exclaimed Sir Gerard. "I perceive, or rather suspect, that Alresford and she do not quite understand each other yet. See, he is asking her to sing, which she declines with the air of an empress. By-the-bye, I have discovered perversity is a very prominent trait in Miss Effingham's character. Am I not right, Miss Campbell?"

"No, indeed, Sir Gerard. Mildred is hasty and petulant, I grant, though never wilfully perverse," rejoined Helen, warmly.

"Nay, then, what do you call this?" cried Sir Gerard, laughing, as Mildred's clear voice sounded through the room, while Sir Richard Tennyson leaned nonchalantly beside her at the piano, and turned the pages of her book.

"I am very, very sorry," exclaimed Helen, rising, and going towards the piano.

At this moment Mr. Campbell's carriage was announced. Miss Effingham hastily ran through the song, whilst Helen took leave of Lady Elvaston, who looked pale and unhappy, but extorted a promise from her, that she would spend the following few days at the Priory. Mildred then took her arm, and they quitted the drawing-room together.

"Now, Helen, not a word! I cannot bear it! I have been mad—insane, to-night. Do not reproach me! But if you care a straw for me, come to-morrow early,—as early as you can," exclaimed Mildred, as they ascended the stairs. "Will you come and take pity upon me, Helen?" and Miss Effingham's lip quivered, as she paused before entering her dressing-room, where Aglaë was waiting.

"I will, indeed, Mildred," replied Helen hastily, for tears now poured down Miss Effingham's cheeks. "Go down again, dearest, and make your peace with Lord Alresford. Oh, Mildred, if you do not, how much sorrow this evening's petulance may cost you! Delay not an instant."

"I cannot. I shall not go down stairs again to-night. I am too wretched," and she abruptly entered the room; where, of course, Aglaë's presence prevented further argument.

Helen then affectionately took leave of her, and in a few minutes descended again. At the carriage she found Sir Gerard Baynton talking to her brother.

“So you see, Miss Campbell, I could not resist greeting my old friend, Archibald,” said he, as he handed her in. “Make my best compliments to Mrs. Campbell. I shall do myself the honour of waiting upon her to-morrow. You will have a lovely drive through the park. Good-night.”

CHAPTER IV.

"WELL, Helen, how do you do this morning? I hope the Earl and Sir Gerard Baynton made themselves agreeable last night," exclaimed Colin Campbell, throwing his arms round his sister's neck, to the infinite damage of her snowy little collar, and giving her a hearty kiss as she entered the breakfast-room.

"Excessively so. We had a very large party."

"And I should think a most agreeable one likewise, judging from the time you staid last night. Why, I sat up to hear how this grand affair went off, until positively my eyes began to close of themselves; so I thought it best to make off. Come, Helen, tell me who Mildred's mysterious knight resembles?"

"I wish, Colin, you would allow your sister to eat her breakfast, instead of listening to your non-

sense. Sit down, Helen, my dear; here is your coffee," said Mrs. Campbell.

"And as I am sure also she must be hungry, after the fatigue of sitting up half the night, here is a roll for you to begin upon, Helen: and see, I have gathered you a bunch of violets still sparkling with dewdrops."

"Oh, how kind of you! But, Colin, you are growing quite romantic," cried Helen, laughing, as she fastened the flowers in her brooch.

"But it would have been more romantic had Sir Gerard brought them. Ah, Helen, I do not despair."

"I assure you, Colin, your sister found Sir Gerard Baynton very agreeable last night. He certainly paid her great attention, and seemed quite anxious to renew his acquaintance with us."

"Oh, mamma, how your imagination magnifies the trifling conversation I had with Sir Gerard," replied Helen, slightly blushing. "It was so very natural he should be interested in hearing again of so old and kind a friend as yourself."

"Yes; I am sure it will give me great pleasure to see Sir Gerard again, and I trust you expressed

as much, my dear. You said, did you not, that he spoke most enthusiastically of Lord Alresford?" rejoined Mrs. Campbell, pouring out the coffee.

"Indeed, he spoke most highly and affectionately of his friend; and, as far as outward appearances go, I never saw a finer or more intellectual face than the Earl's."

"Appearances are deceitful, my dear Helen; and I can well imagine, if Mildred likes, and is silly enough to be entertained by the absurdities of Colonel Sutherland, that she would feel a kind of restraint in the society of such a man as Lord Alresford. For my own part, I always considered his manners too frigid for so young a man. But I wonder where your father and Archibald are? Do, Colin, go out and see if they are anywhere within hail. They generally take themselves off in this provoking way, and then complain that the coffee is cold."

"All right. Here they are, mother!" exclaimed Colin, dropping into his chair again, as Mr. Campbell and his son entered the room.

Helen sprang forwards to embrace her father.

"Well, Helen, I did not expect to see you down so soon this morning. Had you a pleasant party last night?—and how did you like the Earl?"

"I cannot tell you, papa, how fascinated I was. To be sure, I had not much conversation with him, and, perhaps, I am forming a hasty judgment; but there is a quiet, high-bred repose and dignity in his manner, which, were I in Mildred's place, I should feel very attractive."

"Yes; he certainly has all this," replied Mr. Campbell, drawing his chair to the table, "and, what is more, a highly cultivated mind also. Lord Alresford, or I am much mistaken, expects to find in the woman he marries, a sensible, intelligent companion, and not a frivolous, trifling doll, to be petted by adulation into good-humour. But I think Mildred, with her beauty and talent, would suit him admirably, could she get rid of her absurd penchant for Colonel Sutherland. I trust, Helen, she had good sense enough, yesterday evening, to show him that from henceforth all this nonsensical partiality must for ever be cast aside."

"Do not ask me a single word about Mildred's conduct last night," rejoined Helen, earnestly. "All I trust is, that Lord Elvaston will have the good sense never more to invite Colonel Sutherland—at least, if this marriage is to be."

"Which is very doubtful, in my opinion," inter-

posed Mrs. Campbell. "It is quite marvellous how some people will persist in running counter to their good fortune. Mildred's conduct in this affair appears to me deliberate insanity! Here she is sought by a nobleman of princely fortune, handsome, talented, and I suppose attached to her, or he would not put up with her megrims; and all this she is ready to reject for the sake of a chattering popinjay of a Colonel of Dragoons! I should like much to discover what first induced Lord Alresford to engage himself to her. Do you know, Helen?"

"My dear, you must allow Mildred to have her secrets like other people, and if she chooses to confide them to Helen, we should not ask her to betray what she evidently has no right to do," interposed Mr. Campbell.

"At any rate, Helen, I never saw Mildred look more radiantly beautiful than last night. I was waiting for you in the morning room when you both passed, but talking so earnestly, that neither of you saw me. I suppose it was about the Colonel, for Mildred's fair cheek glowed like the flowers in her hair. All I have to say is, that if the Earl can long withstand the influence of her sunny smile, he must be made of

stone, and, therefore, not worthy to possess her. I wish she had been engaged to Sir Gerard Baynton!" exclaimed Archibald Campbell.

"Mildred will presently come to her senses," observed Mr. Campbell; "at present she is prejudiced and—shall I let you into a profound secret?—a little jealous of the Lady Catherine Neville."

"Lady Catherine Neville! What could put such an idea into your head, my dear? Mildred, indeed, would have a formidable rival, if Lady Catherine's beauty is at all comparable to what it was when we left Weldon; for a more lovely, interesting child I never met with. Poor thing! she lived almost the life of a nun in that dismal Wardour Court; her only companion a Mrs. Otway, to whom Lady Willingham, on her deathbed, committed her daughter's education. Lord Willingham shut himself up after his wife's death, and was seen by none—no, not even by his steward—for upwards of two years. I wonder whether Mrs. Otway is still alive, and living at Wardour Court."

"I do not believe Mildred would condescend to be jealous of Lady Catherine Neville, or of anybody else. She must be too conscious of her own worth. 'Tis strange how sometimes the greatest

treasures are bestowed on people who do not value them!" exclaimed Archibald.

"Nay, I think there is a great deal of truth in papa's remark. Did you know that Lady Catherine has an aunt married to some Italian nobleman, which perhaps explains her long residence abroad?" asked Helen.

Mr. Campbell was about to reply, but his wife interposing, he smiled, and quietly allowed her to proceed.

"To be sure, Helen. Lady Willingham was a daughter of the late Marquis of Lulworth. Let me see, I think she was the Marquis's second daughter; and Lady Eva, her eldest sister, I am pretty sure, married the Count Pezzaro, a Sicilian nobleman. Then there was Lady Amabel—stay: really, upon consideration, she must have been the eldest, and Lady Beatrice the youngest child. Colin, my dear boy, give me the Peerage. You will find it in the left-hand corner of the bookcase opposite."

"Well, Helen, how did you like Sir Gerard?" asked Archibald Campbell. "Is he not a fine, agreeable fellow?"

Mrs. Campbell momentarily ceased turning over the leaves of the heavy tome before her to listen to her daughter's reply.

"I found him most amusing and lively. He admired dear Mildred excessively."

"And, I should think, is far better suited to her than the Earl," rejoined Archibald Campbell.

"Sir Gerard seems to possess a *gay laisser aller* kind of disposition, and if pride does slumber beneath, 'tis not the least bit apparent. Lord Alresford's fault, I should say, is haughty inflexibility of temper. Were I Mildred, I should be proud to have won such a man; but I do not yet know sufficient of his character to say whether I ever could love him."

"So upon the whole I perceive you favour the Earl, Helen. What a little fool Mildred must be to behave so badly: that is, if she intends to marry him," said Colin.

"*Quand on est heureux on ne s'y connaît pas ; mais quand on est vraiment malheureux on n'est que trop sensible du bonheur passé.* So, I fear only under rude discipline will our friend at length learn wisdom," observed Mr. Campbell. "I think your mother said something last night about your going to stay at the Priory. When do you go, Helen?" added he, after a short pause.

"I promised to go to-day."

"I should have been dreadfully chagrined at this engagement last night, Helen; for Sutherland and myself went to look at the mare you admired so much, when ridden last winter by Miss Tennyson, and I had set my heart on your trying her this morning. However, Burton writes me word his groom has met with a bad accident, and consequently he cannot send her to Greysdon until to-morrow."

"Dear Archy, I really know not how to thank you enough! I feel sure I shall manage her capitally. She is such a beautiful, docile creature," said Helen, with a bright smile.

"Well, Helen, you shall exhibit your horsemanship to-morrow, for Sir Gerard's edification," rejoined Archibald, rising from the breakfast table, and lounging towards the window.

"What's all this, Helen? Are you really going? What a bore!" exclaimed Colin. "I knew the people at the Priory would disturb the quiet of our village."

"I have it! I have found it!" suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Campbell, triumphantly. "I thought I was right. It seems the late Marquis

of Lulworth had three daughters, co-heiresses, by his wife Margaretta, daughter of Lord St. Arderne; Lady Amabel, who married Egremont Turville, Esquire, of Baysford Abbey; Lady Eva married to Count Pezzaro; and the Lady Beatrice, wife of the Right Honourable the Earl of Willingham, mother of the Lady Catherine Neville —”

“I beg pardon, mother, for interrupting you, but here is a gentleman coming across the churchyard towards the house.” Mrs. Campbell started. “He looks very like somebody I have seen before,” continued Archibald, gazing earnestly. “Yes; and I vow ’tis no less a personage than Sir Gerard Baynton. I must go and meet him.”

Mrs. Campbell closed the book immediately; but, spite of her loquacity, she was really too well bred to appear confused or flurried.

“Helen, you are looking rather pale this morning: go nearer the fire, my dear. Sir Gerard must have been very much struck with you, I am sure, to pay us so early a visit.”

“Well, Helen, this is capital!” cried the incorrigible Colin. “Mamma has already settled in her own mind that you are to be Lady Baynton.

I trust your ladyship, when you come into possession of your mansion, the Chauntry, will grant me permission to shoot and fish as I will in your woods and lakes, and allow me the run of your stables. Stay! for this latter boon I think I had better remain and be introduced to my brother-in-law elect."

"Hush, hush, Colin!" exclaimed Mr. Campbell.

"Really, Colin, your tongue will be your ruin," said Mrs. Campbell, sharply; piqued at having her secret projects so roughly disclosed; "but I must entreat you to reserve your jests for a more convenient season, as it will be hardly agreeable for your sister should they be overheard by Sir Gerard."

"I would not displease Helen for the world,"—began Colin, in more subdued accents, as Sir Gerard Baynton and Archibald Campbell made their appearance.

"Well, Mrs. Campbell," exclaimed Sir Gerard, advancing and warmly extending his hand, "I cannot express the pleasure it gives me to shake hands again with you, my former kind and indulgent friend. I fear, however, you will think my boyish freaks adhere as closely as ever, in timing

my visit at this most unseasonable hour," added he quickly, glancing at the breakfast table; "but Miss Campbell last night kindly led me to hope I should not be an unwelcome visitor."

"Indeed, Sir Gerard, this meeting gives me more pleasure than I can express: it recalls the happy days spent at Weldon," replied Mrs. Campbell, graciously.

Sir Gerard then greeted Mr. Campbell; was introduced to Colin; made friends with Henrietta; talked over the party again with Helen, and finally ensconced himself by Mrs. Campbell's work-table; and, in her skilful hands, was soon deep in the details of his own individual history, and of that of almost every personage of her acquaintance in the county of D — shire.

Helen, in the meantime remembering her promise to Mildred, quietly stole out of the room, and commenced the necessary preparations for her visit. When these were completed, having no desire for Sir Gerard's escort to the Priory, she bade farewell to her father, who had retired to his study, and, leaving a message for Mrs. Campbell, set out alone. For some time she walked briskly along, yet, spite of her impatience to be

with Mildred, the beauty of the day caused her gradually to slacken her speed. It was one of those lovely May mornings when the soft, fresh wind blows, laden with the growing fragrance of spring, and the vivid green foliage quivers and sparkles, as the bright sunbeams dart and flit amid its transparent intricacies. In the distance, the spires of the churches in the neighbouring town of Stanmore cut clear against the deep azure sky, while behind, stretching in a long undulating line on the far horizon, the summits of the beautiful M——shire hills, softened and dissolved themselves in a flood of radiant, golden haze. Every break in the thick trees skirting the road opened tempting zig-zag paths, chequered with sunshine and shadow; and every now and then a hare or rabbit scudded past, brushing away the sparkling dew-drops in its course, as it plunged into the blue depths of the wood. Helen felt cheered: the bright face of nature, and the harmony which everywhere greeted her, as all around glowed and revelled under the fructifying sun, cast its reflex on her spirits, and made her feel more competent to the task of encouraging and fortifying Mildred's good resolutions.

Again she quickened her pace, and in less than half an hour found herself in the boudoir. Miss Effingham was seated on the sofa, her elbow leaning on the table, her head resting on her hand. She wore a loose wrapping gown, and her beautiful hair was bound negligently round her head. A tray with her still untouched breakfast stood before her, though it was nearly one o'clock. She started, and hastily turned her head as the door opened: Helen saw that her cheek was very pale and dimmed with tears.

"Dear, dear Helen, you have come at last: I have been counting every second in anxious expectation," cried she, as she arose and flung her arms round Helen's neck, and sobbed convulsively.

"Mildred, what has happened since we parted?" asked Helen earnestly, alarmed at her excessive agitation. "Have you seen Lord Alresford this morning?"

"No; but I have heard from him," exclaimed Mildred, pointing to an open letter on the sofa; and her tears gushed forth again. "Helen, I must have been insane yesterday evening!"

"My poor Mildred, had you but listened to my

advice—however, this may easily be repaired. Let me summon Lady Elvaston.”

“Helen, you mistake me. I never can love Lord Alresford: never, never! therefore, though I may regret the mode in which I suffered my dislike to manifest itself, I cannot repent the impression created. This dreadful engagement will be the bane of my existence. Oh, Helen! parents have no right to hang such grievous burdens on their children. I cannot endure to contemplate the future, and I tremble at the responsibility of becoming the wife of such a man as Alresford:—one whose standard is so high, and who despises me!” said Miss Effingham rapidly.

“This strange fancy seems to haunt you; though I am convinced it is a groundless one, and now I am able to say so from personal observation, Mildred. Who can have insinuated such doubts into your mind? Is it Colonel Sutherland?” asked Helen boldly, resolved to probe to the very bottom of the wound.

“Sutherland has scarcely ever breathed Lord Alresford’s name.”

“Really! when the whole county has been ringing with the report of your engagement to Lord Alresford, yet Colonel Sutherland, whom

it most concerned, never took the trouble to ascertain its truth!" rejoined Helen, indignantly.

"Yet, Helen, 'tis nothing but the knowledge of this fatal betrothal which prevents him from declaring himself. I am sure he loves me! Helen, you think me weak, foolish—but you forget that the whole happiness of my life depends on the events of the next few days. Did you not perceive Sutherland's distress last night?" and she fixed her eyes earnestly, almost beseechingly, on Helen's face.

"No, Mildred, I did not discover any such symptom. Bear with me, and suffer me to tell you my real sentiments," continued she, as Mildred turned away. "My firm belief is, that were you this moment free from your engagement, Colonel Sutherland would not ask you to become his wife. He could not—he dare not; for, I am persuaded, he is engaged to Miss Conway!"

"Never will I believe it from any lips but his own. He could not be so base!" exclaimed Mildred passionately.

"But, Mildred, consider—are you not guilty of the very same outrage towards Lord Alresford?"

"Lord Alresford is devoted heart and soul to Lady Catherine Neville."

"Have you his own warrant for this assertion?"

"Helen, you torture me. Is it not apparent in every word he utters—every line he writes?"

"No," replied Helen, calmly.

"Not, when in this very letter he gives me a week to consider, and decide definitively, whether I intend to become his wife? A touching proof of affection, you must acknowledge, to be prepared to resign me so easily!" Helen gazed at her with amazement as she continued, with flushing cheek,—"Yes; and he affects, moreover, to treat me as capricious, childish—when my ambition is to be loved ardently, entirely, by the man I marry. In short, you may look as incredulous as you will, Helen, I must be loved as Edward Sutherland loves me."

A mournful smile curled Helen's lip.

"But, Mildred, what if you find, as assuredly you will, that Colonel Sutherland, flattered by the notice of the beautiful, wealthy, and betrothed Miss Effingham, suffered himself to be betrayed into professions which—I will not say as a man of honour, for that title, in my opinion, he

has long forfeited,—but with a due regard to his reputation, he would not have hazarded, could he have guessed the unsettled state of your affections.”

“I shall say, if falsehood be permitted thus to mar the fairest portions of one’s life, there is nothing worth living for in this world,” said Mildred despondingly, covering her face with her hands.

“You are exhausted and excited, Mildred. You have not touched a morsel of breakfast. Do allow me to summon Aglaë to fetch some hot coffee, and then, dearest,” continued she, with a slight laugh, “we will discuss what course it will be most prudent and politic for you to adopt.”

“No, do not ring for Aglaë. I cannot bear to see any one at present. I will eat some of this,” replied Mildred, languidly pulling a plate towards her. “That story, Helen, about Miss Conway I am persuaded is false. Caroline Vincent hinted something of the kind yesterday. How humiliated I felt that such a little stinging insect had power to annoy me for a moment!”

“But Mrs. Northcote, whom you cannot accuse of fabricating such reports, told me so likewise.”

“Ah, when once a scandal is current, it runs

through the entire neighbourhood; and I dare say good, simple Mrs. Northcote heard, and believes it profoundly. But, Helen, set your mind at rest; after the probationary week so condescendingly allotted by his Lordship has expired, it is my firm resolve to confirm my engagement, and become in due time Countess of Alresford," said Mildred, with a bitter smile.

"Oh, Mildred! surely, surely not in your present frame of mind, and with your sentiments."

"Yes, Helen, for mamma's sake, I shall tear from my mind every remembrance of the past, and resign myself to my destiny. I cannot tell you how her behaviour affected me last night. I could have worshipped her! She came to see me after you left; and, though I know my conduct must have made her miserable,—must have struck a dagger to her heart, not a reproach did she utter. She kissed me as tenderly as ever—though, Helen, before the Earl's arrival yesterday we had a long conversation together; and then, when I implored her to tell me, whether, in the event of this marriage going off, papa would accept of Lord Alresford's renunciation of the property, should he generously urge it, after trying to evade my question for some time, she reluctantly

replied in the negative; adding, that if my marriage did not annul the obligation, nothing could induce papa to alter his determination."

"Then, Mildred, what could possess you to behave so imprudently? Forgive me, if I speak painfully; but Mildred! I implore you, act honourably—be yourself again! Summon Lord Alresford immediately—his opinion ought to be more to you than the applause of the whole world—and seek a reconciliation," exclaimed Helen, earnestly; tears trembling in her soft eyes as she laid her hand on Mildred's arm.

"No, Helen; 'tis not for me to shorten the probation his Lordship chooses to impose. No! these days shall be spent in schooling myself for my future destiny: a yoke not to be lightly undertaken; as you will confess, after you have read the Earl's letter," continued she, with a slight nervous laugh. "Besides, from Colonel Sutherland's own lips will I learn the truth, or falsehood, of his reported engagement."

"Of what use will this inquiry be?—Dear, dear Mildred! I beseech you, peril not again your good resolutions!"

"Use! nay, surely, Helen, it will serve me as a good and most convincing moral lesson, if true.

Now read the stern admonition of my future *caro sposo*," and she put the letter into Helen's hand. "Stay, first tell me your opinion of the Earl—mind, your real opinion."

"My opinion will be soon told. I think Lord Alresford one of the most fascinating and intellectual persons I have ever seen; and, Mildred, it seems to me, he is a man to whom any woman might speedily become passionately attached."

"Yes, but he must love her first, and show it also. There is a kind of cool indifference in his manner, which to me is absolutely daunting. Oh, Helen! you are just the very wife to have suited him, with your calm, clear judgment, and self-possession. I wish he had chosen you. But read the letter, dearest."

Miss Effingham threw herself back on the sofa. Helen drew the note from its envelope; its purport was as follows:—

"I conclude, after the events of yesterday evening, it will not afford you much surprise to receive this early communication from me. I write not, Miss Effingham, however, to reproach you; for if your good feeling and delicacy have not already convinced you of the impropriety, and (pardon me if I add) levity, of your past conduct, any argu-

ment I could use must be powerless, though, probably, as you are well aware of my sentiments on most subjects, the expression of my unqualified disapproval will be only what you anticipated. 'Tis true, our inclinations are not at our command: God forbid! that I should seek to constrain yours; but our duty is always clear, and though I am disposed to make every allowance for thoughtless caprice, I cannot submit to be trifled with, nor will I permit the woman publicly pledged to me to render herself notorious. Your conscience, Mildred, must testify, by my forbearance under past and grievous provocation, that I seek you not from motives of expediency; and that these sentiments are still dominant, I trust I may be able to prove to you. Despite, therefore, your cold, nay—I was about to write, insulting reception, after an absence of two years, I will not lightly yield the hand pledged to me. Take time to consider: reflect dispassionately; and if, at the conclusion of one week from the present period, you tell me you could be happier with another—you are free! During this time I will so far constrain myself as to remain your father's guest. Should you decide on confirming our engagement, I will not conceal from you that

I expect, and shall require, my promised wife to conform in all essentials to those sentiments and opinions she has so frequently heard me express. If, on the contrary, you decide on the rupture of our engagement, I need scarcely assure you that I will assume the whole responsibility, and break the matter to Lord Elvaston.

“ Believe me yours, very faithfully,

“ ALRESFORD.”

“ Well, Helen, what do you say to this? His Lordship, you will agree, is not sparing of his censure. I acknowledge I deserve all, and everything he says: yet such rebukes, though they doubtless convict, seldom propitiate,” said Mildred, her beautiful lip curling with anger.

“ It is severe, I allow; and evidently written under the influence of wounded feeling. But Mildred, a stranger totally unacquainted with your principles would consider this result as the very thing you were aiming at last night,—to disgust Lord Alresford, and incite him to release you from your promise.”

“ This from you, Helen !” exclaimed Mildred, reddening.

“ Mildred, suppose the Earl overheard, as I

did, your conversation with Colonel Sutherland ?”

Miss Effingham started.

“No, Helen; I will not suppose such a thing. He could then never forgive me,” cried she, shuddering. “How rash I must have been, knowing my future fate was in his hands! Oh! why did he ever go to Italy? Now, Helen, give me your advice: what shall I do?”

“Why, I have already told you,” replied Helen, smiling. “If you intend to marry Lord Alresford, it would be far more amiable and gracious to terminate his suspense at once, and beg him to forget that he ever saw you to so little advantage as yesterday evening. I regretted very much, when I heard from Aglaë you were too unwell to receive his lordship. How did it happen, Mildred?”

“I was too much overpowered with my conversation with dear mamma; and when the Earl arrived, to tell you the truth, I was indulging in a hearty good fit of crying.”

“But afterwards?”

“Well, afterwards, mamma came to fetch me, and I had an interview of a few minutes with the Earl in her dressing-room; and then we went

down into the drawing-room together," replied Miss Effingham, evasively.

"But was not Lord Alresford's greeting kind?"

"How curious you are, Helen! Oh, yes! very. I believe he kissed my cheek, and said something about his happiness in being with me again; or a speech to that purport: but I forget."

"And what did you say, Mildred?"

"Really, Helen, I cannot bind myself to repeat correctly every word that passed. I think I thanked his lordship very properly for the compliment," replied Miss Effingham, with affected nonchalance, twisting the tassels of the cord which confined her robe-de-chambre.

"What! Was this all?"

"All! What would you have more?" She stopped and coloured, as she caught Helen's eye. "No; I will not aggravate my omissions by this trifling. I confess I did not receive Lord Alresford as he had a right to expect. But Helen, dear, leave me awhile now, for I think I had better finish my toilette and go down to lunch; and then you shall see I will demean myself so beautifully that the Earl shall be filled with amazement at the success of his eloquence," said she, with a faint laugh. "Come, let me first show you your

room. Among my many blessings, Helen, I am sure I ought to thank God for giving me a dear, kind, sincere friend like yourself," said Miss Effingham, as she linked her arm through Helen's, and they proceeded together down the gallery.

"You see you are not a very great way from me; but, Helen, as soon as you can, pray go down and cheer dear mamma," exclaimed Mildred, as she threw open the door of a pretty, cheerful room, with a snowy toilette, and curtains and hangings of bright, flowery chintz.

"I will go down stairs immediately."

"Then, Helen, you advise me to send no written reply to the Earl's charming billet?" said Mildred, unclosing the door again, and half entering the room.

"No; far better let Lord Alresford read his answer in your altered demeanour. You will soon come down, Mildred, won't you?"

Miss Effingham nodded her pretty little head sagaciously, and vanished.

CHAPTER V.

HELEN had been sitting alone with Lady Elvaston about half an hour when Mildred came down, looking worn and languid from mental agitation and a sleepless night.

Lady Elvaston gazed anxiously in her daughter's face, and her eyes followed her with a pained thoughtful expression, as Mildred restlessly made the circuit of the room, and then pausing at the window, looked long and steadily without. She started at the sound of a step in the adjoining room, and, half turning round, glanced uneasily at the door.

"Sir Gerard went soon after breakfast to call upon Mrs. Campbell, and, I suppose, is gone off on some expedition with Archibald; and Lord Alresford has accompanied your father to Stanmore," hastily said Lady Elvaston, following her daughter's glance.

Mildred breathed a deep sigh of relief, and threw herself on a stool at her mother's feet.

"Helen, what a beautiful cushion you are working. I never saw anything more glowing than these roses. You must finish it for me; and when I sit in my drawing-room at Amesbury, I shall gaze at it and think of all the dear ones I have left behind at Greysdon," exclaimed Mildred, tears springing to her eyes.

"Nay, Mildred, I feared the frequency of our visits will afford you very brief intervals for such reminiscences," replied Lady Elvaston, cheerfully.

"As we three are left to our own devices this afternoon, what shall we do, mamma?" said Mildred with a sigh, putting back the canvass on Helen's knee.

"It is now a quarter past two o'clock," replied Lady Elvaston, glancing at the pendule. "I thought we would either drive out, or walk, whichever you felt most inclined to do."

"A drive, then. The air I think will do me good. Let us order the carriage at three, mamma, please."

The bell was accordingly rung, the carriage ordered, and then the three ladies, somewhat *tristement*, sat down to lunch. They had scarcely

commenced, when the sound of carriage-wheels on the gravel without brought a flush to Mildred's cheeks.

"Our visitors most probably are the Farnleighs. I have been expecting them for some days past," said Lady Elvaston.

"No ; it is the Tennysons' carriage, I am sure," exclaimed Helen Campbell, as a dashing, smalt-blue britscka and greys whirled past the windows. "I caught a glimpse of Miss Tennyson's pink bonnet and feathers."

"Poor Clara ! she always dresses to drive about in the country, as she would for the Park in the height of the season. But what can bring her here again ? Helen, you must do all the talking for me, for I am not in spirits to cope with her gossip. What a pity Sir Gerard is not at home !"

Miss Tennyson presently entered, and, though too much dressed for a country morning call, looked well ; for her figure was commanding, and, conscious of her want of taste, she had the good sense to defer the selection of her toilette to her maid ; who, she took infinite pains to inform every body, was a most accomplished artiste.

"Good-morning, Lady Elvaston. I dare say

you are surprised to see me again so soon. Mildred, I hope your headache is well this morning? I pitied you so much last night. Is it quite gone? for you look rather *abimée*. How do you do, Miss Campbell?" exclaimed Miss Tennyson, in her usual thoughtless manner.

"We are all tolerably well, thank you," said Lady Elvaston, replying for the party. "I trust Lady Tennyson was not fatigued last night?"

"Oh, dear, no, not in the least. She is gone with Sir Richard to drive in his new phaeton this afternoon: a terribly imprudent thing; for Dick has changed his horses, and I am sure it will be a marvellous piece of luck, if they both come home without broken bones."

"I hope nothing so shocking will happen. Have you lunched, Clara, or will you take some with us?"

"Thank you, I shall be most happy. What a charming party we make! It is sometimes so pleasant to get rid of the gentlemen; one then can talk at ease, without the slightest restraint: but, Mildred, I must confess I scarcely hoped for this gratification at the Priory to-day."

"Sir Gerard Baynton is gone, I believe, to walk or ride with Mr. Archibald Campbell," replied Miss Effingham, coldly.

"Indeed! I was not aware, until last night, Sir Gerard was an acquaintance of yours, Miss Campbell."

"Perhaps you do not know that papa held the curacy of Weldon some years ago. I am very slightly acquainted with Sir Gerard Baynton."

"Really. The Chauntry is a fine old place, I understand."

"Very."

"Somebody told me, Lady Emily Baynton resides there, which, if true, I consider a great misfortune for Sir Gerard; for whenever mothers live with their sons, or maiden sisters with their brothers, the men are sure to draggle on existence old bachelors."

"I wish Sir Gerard Baynton was here, Clara, instead of roaming no one knows where with Archibald Campbell, unconscious of your anxious solicitude for his welfare," exclaimed Mildred, laughing.

"Nay, it is universally acknowledged, that widowed mothers, and maiden sisters, have prevented more matches than any other people in the world. I appeal to Lady Elvaston."

"Have they? Indeed, Clara, I am not prepared to make so very sweeping an admission. May I give you a little more pâté?"

"Not any more, I thank you. It is all very ingenious of you, Mildred, to turn the conversation so cleverly; but you know well, Sir Gerard was not the personage I alluded to just now."

"Lord Alresford is gone with Lord Elvaston to Stanmore, if it be to him you allude," said Lady Elvaston, thinking it best to put an end at once to Miss Tennyson's inuendoes.

"Indeed! mamma and Dick will probably meet them: that is, if these latter are not upset before they reach Stanmore. Seriously, Mildred, I never saw any one so handsome and distinguished-looking as Lord Alresford. He quite eclipses all the gentlemen in this neighbourhood, as I was observing to Dick as we drove home last night. No one can wonder at your preferring him, after all, to Colonel Sutherland."

Mildred writhed, and the blood suffused her temples.

"If you have quite finished, Clara, we will go to the drawing-room, if you please," said Lady Elvaston, rising hastily.

"Certainly. I want to speak with you, Mildred," cried Miss Tennyson, seizing Miss Effingham's reluctant hand, and drawing it under her arm. "I was as near as possible forgetting the

object of my visit. Colonel Sutherland called very early this morning at Settringham, and said something about an excursion to Fernly Abbey, which you and he had not time fully to arrange yesterday evening. Mamma thought it such a charming project, that we agreed to form a party there the day after to-morrow, and I came to ask whether you and all your friends would join us. It is to be an equestrian pilgrimage; and Sutherland seemed so very anxious, that I almost took upon myself to promise your acquiescence."

Mildred's cheek became pale, and then flushed, and she studiously avoided her mother's or Helen's glance.

"I am quite astonished to hear you advocate a plan of Colonel Sutherland's, Clara. I understood he was most unpopular at Settringham, with all save Sir Richard," replied she, with an effort.

"Did you? Who could possibly have put such an idea into your head?"

"My authority was Lady Tennyson herself."

"Very likely. Mamma does sometimes make the oddest assertions: *c'est sa façon*, and so I let them pass uncontradicted: or, perhaps, she was just recovering from her doze! Will you come?"

"I think, Miss Tennyson, you must not urge Mildred; she has been far from well during these few days past, and the exertion and excitement will be too much," said Helen, gently.

"My dear Mildred, you surely will not think of going," exclaimed Lady Elvaston, anxiously, alarmed at her daughter's silence.

"*Ah, le bonheur opprime quelquefois plus que le malheur*, as Pascal, or Molière, or some other great French moralist, remarks," observed Miss Tennyson, archly. "But surely, dear Mildred, you will not suffer this to deprive us of the pleasure of your company on Friday?"

"My dear child, ——"

"Excuse me, mamma, it would be a great disappointment to me to miss this party; therefore, if you have no objection, I will accept Clara's invitation."

"You must please yourself, Mildred," replied Lady Elvaston, coldly.

"Oh, charming! Then I shall make quite sure of you, Mildred, and we will call for you *en route*—mind and bring Lord Alresford and Sir Gerard. May we also hope to see you, Miss Campbell?"

Helen hesitated.

"Helen, you must go, if it be only to try your new horse."

"So Dick tells me, Miss Campbell, your brother has bought the mare I rode last autumn. She is a splendid creature, and will carry you admirably. Her only defect is, that she is rather hard in the mouth, and therefore difficult to check. Will you not join our Fernly expedition?"

"I cannot quite promise. If you will permit me to accept the invitation conditionally, I shall be most happy so to do," said Helen; resolved to say neither yes, nor no, but to decide when the day arrived what would be most expedient for her to do.

"Oh, certainly, Miss Campbell. I trust the day may be clear, then we shall enjoy the fine view from the hill behind the Abbey. Apropos, I have been this morning to pay an early visit to Mrs. Wedderbourne, who wanted to consult me on the choice of decorations for the supper-room. Her ball will really be quite a splendid affair: Jullien's band, a supper from Gunter's, the choicest flowers; and, above all, the old nabob Judge's magnificent gold epergne and vases, we have all heard so much about, are to be taken from

the mysterious cases in which they arrived from Calcutta, and employed to decorate the principal table."

"Good, fussy Mrs. Wedderbourne should receive her guests under a canopy of silver damask, to make the scene complete. It would be kind in you, Clara, to hint this to her," said Mildred, superciliously.

"Ah, I know you are quizzing me now: but I must positively depart. May I ring for the carriage, Lady Elvaston?"

Never was permission more gladly given.

"Caroline Vincent talked of connecting their conservatory with the camellia house, and lighting them both with coloured lamps; but I quite put my veto on that project. I always consider it a great mistake to intermingle coloured light with flowers: it entirely spoils their hues—don't you think so, Miss Campbell?"

"I dare say it does," replied Helen, without raising her eyes from her work; "but ——"

"I know we all thought so at Settringham, when mamma gave her grand fête in honour of Dick's coming of age. Then, decidedly, Mildred, we shall see you on Friday: we must make the most of you during the short period you remain

amongst us. I shall like of all things, however, to be at your wedding, and then, afterwards, pay you a visit at Amesbury."

Miss Effingham glanced at Helen, amused at the very supposition of Lord Alresford being called upon to act the host to, and entertain a being so frivolous and loquacious.

"Of course, Clara, Mildred would be much concerned not to see you amongst her other friends at her wedding," said Lady Elvaston.

"Indeed, I trust so. Here comes the carriage, so now, adieu!" cried Miss Tennyson, starting from her chair. "We shall call for you about twelve on Friday, Mildred, and mamma intends to take a dejeuner to spread on the grass under the ruins; so you will not be alarmed, Lady Elvaston, if we return rather late. Miss Campbell, pray persuade your brothers to join us also: the *coup d'œil*, when we are all gathered together, will be charming, and will remind one of a goodly cavalcade of olden days defiling down the hill to the Abbey gates. Good-bye—pray make my kind remembrances to Lord Elvaston;" and Miss Tennyson, after shaking hands round, and embracing Mildred, took her departure.

"Poor Clara! I am almost ashamed to confess

how great a relief her absence is. Helen, did you ever listen to such nonsense as her conversation? Positively, one could only expect to hear the like from an inmate of a *maison de santé*; and yet, poor girl, she is thoroughly well-meaning and good-natured," exclaimed Miss Effingham, listlessly.

"Yes; Clara Tennyson was introduced very early into society, and suffered to take her own course, with a miserable education and unsettled principles. It is lamentable to think Lady Tennyson's weak, foolish fondness for her children has been productive of such lasting injury to them both," said Lady Elvaston.

"I pity Clara sincerely, and have repeatedly tried to be of use to her. Some few months ago, I attempted to make her understand and apply the moral of the good Count of Anjou's rebuke to King Louis of France, when taunted by the monarch for his love of learning, and the arts—*'Sachez, sire, qu'un prince non lettré est un âne couronné,'* though without success. But come, Helen dear, as we shall not improve Clara's condition by lamenting over her deficiencies, let us go out and walk somewhere, as it is now too

late to drive to-day," exclaimed Mildred, playfully snatching the work from Helen's hand.

"Mildred," exclaimed Lady Elvaston, earnestly, "I trust you intend to consult Lord Alresford about this Fernly expedition. I cannot express how uncomfortable it makes me. Be advised, my dear child, and give it up; you could not go with any propriety without him, and I feel convinced he will decidedly refuse to meet Colonel Sutherland."

"Mamma," said Miss Effingham, throwing her arm round her mother's neck, "you will think me wicked,—perverse; but, once more, I must see Colonel Sutherland. I am firmly resolved to risk the interview. Do not grieve about it, dearest, dearest mamma; indeed, this shall be my last act of rebellion. I must satisfy myself on one point, and you know not how much my future fate may depend on its issue. Come, Helen!" and Mildred, without once hazarding a glance in her mother's face, seized Helen's arm, and quitted the room.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Miss Effingham and her friend entered the drawing-room, a few minutes before dinner, to Mildred's unspeakable relief, they found no one down but Lord Elvaston, who, ensconced in a comfortable fauteuil, was reading the *Times* newspaper. Miss Effingham had not seen her father since the previous evening. He looked up as they entered.

"Good-morning, Miss Campbell. Well, Mildred, how do you do? I hope a night's repose and reflection have put to flight your strange caprices of yesterday. Upon my soul! Mildred, I was perfectly astounded, and could not divine what possessed you. Your mother made some excuse for your non-appearance at the breakfast-table this morning; but I never saw you look better in my life. I appeal to you, Helen."

"I am pretty well again, dear papa. Do not let us talk any more about yesterday," said Miss Effingham, caressingly. "You have been to Stanmore: did you meet with Lady Tennyson, or Sir Richard?"

"To be sure. They drove up to the 'Queen's Head' while we were there. Oh! you would have been amused had you seen her ladyship's plight. Sir Richard's new horses, she said, had frightened her into fits; rearing, tearing, plunging, and nearly overturning the phaeton several times. As I thought there really was danger from that foolish fellow's headlong driving, I advised her to get out and wait at the hotel until her own carriage could be sent for; a piece of advice she was only too thankful to follow. But here come Alresford and Sir Gerard to talk to you girls whilst I finish my paper," cried Lord Elvaston, good-naturedly, resuming his spectacles.

Mildred coloured deeply and, as Helen fancied, looked agitated. She half arose, however, and held out her hand as the Earl advanced towards her.

"I hope I see Miss Effingham better?" said Lord Alresford, gravely, relinquishing her hand almost immediately.

"I am quite well, thank you," replied Mildred, with glowing cheek. She paused, and then added, "You have been riding with papa this morning?"

"Yes; we have been to Stanmore," replied the Earl, coldly.

"Were there many people in town to-day?—I mean many of our friends," rejoined Mildred, resolved not to be daunted.

"The place seemed to me more animated than usual. Public interest, I suppose, was excited on the result of an investigation into certain charges against a Mr. Blakesley, going forward at the barracks. Lady Tennyson appeared especially interested in the proceedings."

"Miss Tennyson has been here this morning, and told us her mother was gone to Stanmore. She appeared rather alarmed for her, as Sir Richard was trying a pair of new horses in his phaeton for the first time."

"Yes; and I assure you Lady Tennyson also yielded very readily and gladly to your father's suggestion, that she should wait at the hotel for her own carriage."

"What! Have you seen my friend Miss Tennyson this morning?" exclaimed Sir Gerard.

"I had a great deal of conversation with her after you left yesterday evening," continued he, addressing Helen. "How provoking that I was not at home!"

"Excessively so," said Helen, laughing; "but I am happy to tell you she left a special invitation for you to join a riding party to Fernly Abbey on Friday."

"Did she? Oh! of course I shall go. But, Miss Campbell, do you know she was more amiable still the other evening, and invited me to Settringham. But, tell me, how long have you been here?"

"Why, I cannot precisely tell. I arrived at the Priory about one o'clock, and now I should imagine it is six: I must leave you to find out the difference."

"Mrs. Campbell said you treated me most shamefully. I waited a considerable time, hoping to have the pleasure of walking with you here; but when I ventured to hint that I knew Miss Effingham expected you early, your brother Colin assured me your first conference together must be half over, as you had been gone two hours at the very least. I have been used most uncourteously. Do you not think so, Miss Effingham?"

Mildred did not reply. She was sitting with her back to Sir Gerard, bending over the pages of a large volume on the table. Lord Alresford was talking politics with her father, and Lady Elvaston sat reading in the little boudoir beyond; though her eye often wandered from her book, and rested on the occupants of the adjoining room. Sir Gerard did not repeat his question; but Helen, who, from her position, was enabled to catch a glance at Mildred's fair face, saw the deepened colour on her cheek, and hastened to reply.

"Trials, you know, Sir Gerard, often reveal striking virtues; therefore you ought, instead of blaming, to thank me for my flight, which exhibits to our admiration your virtue of patience."

"Now, Sir Gerard, both Helen and I expect a full and perfect account of your morning's adventures. In the first place, where have you been?" exclaimed Mildred, suddenly rising from her seat, and taking a chair near Helen.

"I have been out with Mr. Archibald Campbell. Your friend will tell you that is a sufficient guarantee," replied Sir Gerard, laughingly; "and I appeal to her, whether I ought

not to be forthwith discharged without further examination."

"No; I have nothing further to do with it. Your cause is removed from my court."

"You are arraigned on the high charge of betaking yourself to your own devices, and suffering, in a most unknighly manner, a trio of ladies to sit down to their mid-day repast without an attempt on your part to pay them just and reasonable devoir," cried Mildred, sportively.

"Nay; justice, fair judge. Listen to my unanswerable defence. One beauteous lady, this morning, whether with or without cause I know not, refused to shower her bright smiles upon us, and left us uncertain how long the eclipse would last. Still, however, intent upon doing her good service, I went in search of her sister grace, who, in the most subtle manner, likewise fled my good offices. Now, I say the first lady is the cause of all the misconceptions which have arisen, and I think ought to change places with the accused," replied Sir Gerard, fixing his eyes keenly on her face.

Miss Effingham coloured deeply, but presently resumed the conversation. Helen thought she

had seldom seen her so animated. She talked merrily also at the dinner table, but Helen remarked a restless unsteady glitter in her eye, especially when it met that of the Earl; who also cheerfully bore his share in the conversation, but as on the day before, watched her attentively. It was a most lovely summer evening; a soft refreshing breeze poured through the open windows of the dining-room, and the setting sun shot forth beams tinged with the brightest blue, green, and crimson, the wavy ripples of the noble lake, which stretched away far into the park on the south side of the mansion.

"The evening is really too inviting to remain within doors," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, approaching one of the windows, when the ladies arose to retire. "I never remember seeing a more splendid sunset! Suppose we go down to the lake and have a row, before coffee?"

"Exactly the very evening for boating. Alresford, does it not remind you of Morges and our perilous excursion with Lord Willingham and his daughter, on the Lake of Geneva? I shall never forget Lady Catherine's self-possession on that occasion."

"We had a very narrow escape, I own,"

replied Lord Alresford. "But, Lady Elvaston, I trust Sir Gerard's reminiscences of past dangers will not deter you now from accompanying us."

"I shall enjoy it exceedingly. Helen, you will come,—and you also Mildred. It is impossible to resist the temptation of such an evening."

"Then, since we are all agreed, I will ring and order Ashford to get the boat ready; and if you, my dear, will go and put on your shawl and then walk down to the lake, you will find us awaiting you there," said Lord Elvaston.

In a very short time all the party assembled on the grassy margin of the lake. Sir Gerard sprang into the boat, which rocked and dipped on the surface of the clear shining water, and seizing an oar pushed it forwards to the landing-stairs.

"Come, Miss Campbell, why do you not get in? Let me help you," said Lord Elvaston. "Keep the boat steady, Baynton."

Helen turned and looked for Mildred. She was standing, apparently in deep reverie, a few yards distant.

"Mildred, why don't you come?" continued

Lord Elvaston, impatiently. "The beauty of the evening will have vanished before we get you all into the boat."

"I do not think I shall go in the boat this evening, papa, so do not wait for me," said Miss Effingham, approaching. "I have just remembered an errand which ought not to be delayed; and I am going, instead, across the park to Norris's."

"What nonsense, Mildred! Send your maid to-morrow, and come along;" said her father, sharply.

What can this new freak mean? thought Helen; though she could scarce repress a smile at the evident amusement depicted on Sir Gerard's face.

"No, papa, thank you, I prefer going myself," responded Mildred, in very decisive tones: she then turned towards Lord Alresford, and the rich colour mounted to her cheek, as she added,— "Would it be disagreeable, or too much, to ask your lordship to forego this excursion and walk with me?"

"Certainly not. It will give me great pleasure, if you wish it," replied the Earl.

Mildred blushed crimson, and for a moment a

powerful impulse prompted her to step into the boat; but she repressed it, and silently took Lord Alresford's arm, while her father, with a shrug, hurried Helen in, and, following himself, wished the pedestrians a pleasant walk, and the party pushed off.

"What a handsome couple they make!" exclaimed Sir Gerard in a low voice to Helen, as Lord Alresford and Mildred pursued their way along the border of the lake, a little in advance of the boat. "How gracefully Miss Effingham atoned for her caprice, neglect—or what shall I call it—of last night!"

Meanwhile, Mildred and the Earl proceeded on their way in silence. It was a glorious evening, and all around seemed gay, glowing and harmonious. Now magnificent trees for a little space overshadowed their path, rearing and entwining their lofty boughs so as at times to shut out even a glimpse of the deep blue sky above, then suddenly breaking and studding the soft turf with clusters of three or four, down to the water's edge. Thousands of various flies and insects flitted with dreamy buzz over the transparent water, settling lazily on the pale lilies floating on its surface like cups of drifted snow; and

here and there a dark blue dragon-fly darted from its leafy covert, and after capriciously fluttering from one delicate blossom to another, dived with lightning speed amid the fragrant herbage and vegetation of an adjoining meadow. In the distance, the park stretched far as the eye could range, chequered with deep shadows and bright sunny patches, upon which numerous herds of deer indolently basked. As for Mildred, her heart beat violently, and she could scarcely believe that she was really leaning on the arm of the dreaded Lord Alresford, and had of her own free will absolutely subjected herself to a *tête-à-tête*.

"It is now nearly a year and a half since we strolled thus together, Mildred. What numberless events have glided by during this interval!" at length observed the Earl, slowly; and there was something in the deep full tones which seemed to say—"and how little better are we acquainted!"

"You have chiefly passed this period abroad," rejoined Mildred, hastily.

"Yes; I have wandered in Italy, and through the south of France. I quitted Venice about four months ago."

Mildred remembered Venice, and the Earl's unanswered letters, and hastened to change the subject.

"What a lovely evening!" exclaimed she; "all things appear so fresh and fragrant under this glowing sky. I think there is nothing so delightful as to linger out of doors during one of these delicious sunsets!"

"It is so, indeed; and hard must that nature be, which, amid a scene of such calm loveliness and repose, does not cast from it some of the dross of earth, and feel the purer and better from its commune with Him who created all things so fair and harmonious! Abroad, scenery is on a more gigantic scale; but, perhaps excepting some parts of Germany, one never meets, out of Old England, with the rich pastures and woodlands, ever-verdant turf and green hedgerows, which form so conspicuous a *point-de-vue* in our English landscapes. I am glad, however, Mildred, to find you have the taste requisite to make a good *châtelaine*—a keen sense and enjoyment of the beauties of the country."

"Ah, yes! no one can love bright sun, flowers, and foliage, more than I do," replied Mildred quickly; piqued that the Earl should imagine her

(as by his last words she hastily concluded he did) so devoid of refined feeling and sentiment, as to express such vivid pleasure that at least he had discovered one congenial point in their tastes and pursuits. "But at the risk of exciting your surprise at my want of taste, I must be candid enough to confess that I should reluctantly pass the entire year in the country. We generally spend three or four months in Town."

"I quite agree with you. To thoroughly enjoy the country—or rather, I should say, to appreciate it—requires the novelty and contrast of the heated rooms and dingy atmosphere of Town."

"But do you not think custom and fashion, in people of our station, render such a visit indispensable? How could one be *au courant* with the world, literature,—in fact, anything,—if eternally buried in the country?" demanded Mildred, resolutely.

"You quite mistake my meaning, Mildred. I think a yearly sojourn in town for persons of our condition—in short, for every one, most delightful and beneficial; but I should be sorry to see any person for whom I had a regard, partake in all the dissipation of a London season, and after

months of fevered excitement, return home broken in health, and morally unfitted for the discharge of her highest and most sacred duties."

Oh,—thought Mildred,—this is a gentle hint of what I may expect, and the rule and method to be observed at his Lordship's town mansion.

"Nay, perhaps, you will find it difficult to engraft your standard upon others; and to make it quite clear how much, or how little, they may mingle with the world to insure your approbation," responded she, playfully.

"Not my approval alone, Mildred. I would fain hope that principle, and the knowledge that we are accountable beings for all the good and evil of our actions—for all occasions lost, or trifled away, of doing good—would be a far nobler guide and aim. Besides, I am sure you will agree with me that a woman, whether wife or daughter of a man of large landed estate, has far greater opportunities for active benevolence, and of making herself beloved and revered among the tenantry or poor dependants of her husband or father—and, consequently, of opening to herself a purer source of pleasure—than amidst the frivolity of fashionable dissipation."

"Oh, I dare say all you say is true enough,"

rejoined Mildred, slightly tossing her graceful head; "but I confess I have small vocation to play the part of parish Lady Bountiful!"

Perverse, perverse Mildred! Had Helen been by, she would have proclaimed that scarce was there a cottager in Greysdon or its neighbourhood, whose heart did not glow with gratitude, when it mused on the kindly counsels and pecuniary relief oft-times bestowed by the fair young lady of the Priory.

"Indeed! Do you remember, Mildred, what that stinging censor of mankind, La Rochefoucauld, says, '*Nous nous faisons quelquefois honneur des défauts opposés à ceux que nous avons*?' " replied the Earl, with a smile.

"Nay, the virtue of such persons must be small indeed, to require the aid of so powerful a contrast. But see!" continued she, pointing towards the lake, "the boat is a mere speck now. The breeze must be swift this evening, or rather, perhaps, 't is Sir Gerard Baynton's skilful rowing. What a lively good-natured man he is!"

"Baynton is a favourite wherever he goes, and most deservedly; for never was there any one more estimable and high principled. Lady Emily Baynton, likewise, is just the mother such a son

may indeed be proud of. She is precisely the type of what a woman of rank ought to be—gentle, dignified, benevolent, and devoted to the welfare of others. Lady Emily constantly resides at the Chauntry, and I hope, Mildred, if Amesbury ever becomes your home, you will greatly benefit by her society; for although I do not generally approve of female confidential friends, there is no one I should so sincerely rejoice to see you intimate with.”

“Your Lordship’s code appears to me a very singular and stringent one. May I ask your objection to female friends?” said Mildred, proudly.

“Certainly. I think a woman can have no better confidant than her husband, and all things she cannot fearlessly confide to him had much better remain unspoken. I confess I should be so far jealous of my wife’s affection, that I could not tolerate another should possess, to my exclusion, that confidence which, from the moment she bestowed upon me her hand, is mine by right.”

Mildred said nothing in reply, and for a few minutes they walked on in silence, along a narrow green drive they had just entered, sheltered on both sides by thriving plantations, which led

straight to the lodge Mildred wished to visit. The grass was soft, and spangled with hundreds of bright flowerets, mingling with clustering thickets of double gorse covered with golden blossoms, and birds fluttered joyously amid the hawthorn bushes, the boundary lines of the plantations.

Lord Alresford paused at a sudden break in the woods, through which a fine view of the park and its noble avenues of limes was obtained.

“Admirably as your father, Mildred, has laid out the park and gardens here, I cannot help flattering myself you will find greater beauties at Amesbury. The ground there is more undulating, and the timber older; and disposed, if possible, even more picturesquely than this. My father had great taste, and adorning and beautifying Amesbury was one of his passions.”

“Yes; I have often heard from papa and others, of your noble park at Amesbury. The grounds around the mansion are also beautifully arranged, I am told.”

“I have lately been making considerable alterations since my return from Italy, aided by the good taste of my two friends, Lady Emily Baynton and Lady Catherine. When I quitted home,

Mildred, the parterres of the garden, into which open the windows of the suite of rooms I had selected for you two years ago, were glowing with lovely roses. I ordered them to be planted in such profusion, knowing you preferred roses to any other flower."

Mildred's heart beat; she would have given worlds to put the query, and hear from the Earl's lips, why at that period he had rejected her hand: and as she walked along, how vividly did the wish arise, that her marriage had then taken place.

"It was very kind of you to think thus for my gratification," said she in a low voice, turning away her head to conceal the tears which sprang to her eyes. After a pause, she added quickly,—“Lady Catherine Neville, I suppose, intends now to reside permanently at Wardour Court.”

“Yes; she has quite established herself there. Lord Willingham was long in a declining state of health, and died (as of course you know) at Narbonne, on his road home. Luckily, I was then also abroad, and hastened to offer every consolation and aid in my power to Lady Catherine. Her meek resignation to the blow which bereaved her of her only parent, and left her unprotected in the

world, was unequalled; but young as she is, her mind is one of extraordinary power, blended with a disposition noble, firm, and so totally free from caprice, that 'tis impossible for any one long to withhold their tribute of admiration.

Unconsciously as Lord Alresford spoke, a vivid flush mounted to Mildred's brow, and she hurriedly withdrew her hand from the Earl's arm.

"It must be a source of infinite consolation to Lady Catherine to reside so near to Amesbury, I should imagine," said she at length, in constrained tones.

Lord Alresford turned in surprise, and bent a keen glance on his companion. Miss Effingham's head was averted, but her beautiful figure moved with more stately an air than was its wont. A smile curled the Earl's lip, and a peculiar expression flitted across his features.

"She has often been kind and condescending enough to express herself so," rejoined he, calmly.

Mildred bit her lip.

"Indeed!" replied she, drawing the folds of her shawl closer round her figure, and walking on with a step still more determined. Lord Alresford again attentively regarded her.

"Mildred," at length said he, firmly, but gently,

“let us not raise imaginary barriers, I beseech you. I fear, unhappily, there are already too many real ones to surmount, before we arrive at a right understanding of each other. Believe me, once for all, when I tell you, Lady Catherine can never inspire me with greater interest than is her due as my ward, and, moreover, a very dear and prized friend.”

Mildred trembled, and a vivid colour suffused her cheek. She felt profoundly mortified that her secret pique towards Lady Catherine should have been so promptly detected, and her awe of the Earl returned in full force; as she saw no considerations, no trifling, would deter him from fearlessly administering the antidote to all fancied perverse misconceptions on her part. “How he must despise me!” thought she, “for cherishing and betraying such littleness, and acting so very contrary to his own open candour.”

“Indeed, my lord, you are mistaken. I sought not,—needed not such an explanation!” exclaimed she eagerly. After an embarrassed pause, she then rapidly added,—“Does not Lady Catherine find Wardour Court very dull and solitary?”

“She does not live alone, or otherwise I am sure she must. Mrs. Otway, a distant cousin of

the late Lady Willingham's, who has been her friend for years, resides with her still."

"What, my lord, after your openly avowed disapproval of female confidants!" exclaimed Mildred, archly.

"Lady Catherine is not a wife; therefore, in her position it is highly desirable she should possess some such friend," replied Lord Alresford, smiling: "but, Mildred, I have neither the right nor the power, even if I so willed, to deprive the Lady Catherine of the society of any friends she chooses to cultivate; or even to obtrude my opinions upon her. Before, I was speaking of my wife ——"

"But would you wish to deprive your wife of her friends?" demanded Mildred with spirit.

"Most certainly not. I would have her prize their friendship as ever, but I must have all her confidence—all her heart, or none! Do you think me *exigeant*?" replied Lord Alresford, riveting his gaze keenly on her blushing cheek.

"Yes," faltered Mildred. Then she added quickly, — "You consider, then, this perfect confidence an obligation binding only on one side?"

"Far from it. Let me only respect my wife,

her principles, and conduct, and she will have little cause to complain."

Mildred was silent, and they proceeded until they came in sight of the lodge—the object of her walk.

"I shall not have time to speak with Norris this evening; we have walked so slowly. Upon second thoughts, I will send Aglaë with a message to-morrow morning," said Mildred, pausing.

"Then, shall we turn homewards again?"

Miss Effingham assented.

"What an exceedingly elegant, accomplished girl your friend Miss Campbell appears, Mildred," said the Earl, after a short silence.

"Indeed, she is," replied Mildred, warmly; "and pretty as she is, her goodness surpasses it, as much as she is herself superior to all the world. Yesterday evening ——"

She paused.

"Well Mildred, — yesterday evening. I am anxious to hear every explanation you can possibly afford," rejoined the Earl, kindly, and very earnestly.

"But if I have none to offer—at least not at present," murmured Mildred, after a pause, while a slight tremor shook her frame.

"Then recur not to the subject, I entreat, Miss Effingham," replied the Earl, severely.

"Your Lordship is right. It is a period too exquisitely painful to be lightly recalled," retorted Mildred, haughtily.

The Earl merely bowed, and immediately changed the conversation: but Mildred's heart was heavy. Bewildering thoughts came crowding on her fancy; not, however, unmingled with bitter self-reproach. She could not refrain from mentally acknowledging how much the Earl was superior in intellect to him for whom he had been so faithlessly deserted. She recalled the refined and ever-ready flattery always at Colonel Sutherland's command, and compared it with the stern sincerity and proud truthfulness of Lord Alresford; and in spite of herself, conscience whispered which was most worthy to be prized and treasured. "It is clear he does not love me," mused Mildred: "no! I have alienated him for ever; else would he so pitilessly expose my failings? Yet I feel I could attain even to his standard. Sutherland doubts me not: yes, I could be happier with one who appreciates me!"

The Earl did not interrupt her reverie, and they rapidly continued their homeward walk. The light had gradually faded away into purple

twilight, and wreaths of white mist curled and struggled over the distant lowlands of the park, and around the margin of the lake.

"Your shawl is quite damp. I hope you will not feel any ill effects from our late walk," said Lord Alresford, as they stood a minute together in the hall.

"Oh, no; I am accustomed to be out late."

"I trust we are beginning to understand each other better, Mildred," exclaimed the Earl, as for a second he retained her little hand within his own.

"Yes; I think so: perhaps!" said Mildred, as she darted away from his side, and entered the drawing-room.

Lord Alresford took three or four more turns on the terrace, and then re-entered the mansion.

CHAPTER VII.

A GORGEOUS sunset, some ten months prior to the events of the preceding chapters, shed its glowing hues, and blended into one mass of dazzling vapour, the rugged peaks and dark outline of the ridge of rocky hills which divides the fair province of Languedoc from Roussillon. The day had been oppressively hot: the steady sultry heat of the south, when no soft cloud flits over the sun's disc to stay the ardent beam, under which the verdant foliage loses its fresh crispness and the fairest blossoms droop; and the setting sun, curtained in glorious effulgence, sank at last, and disappeared behind the gloomy and magnificent chain of the Pyrenees, bounding the far horizon; flooding the sky, around and over the ancient city of Narbonne, with clouds of the deepest transparent rose colour. A fresh invigorating breeze then blew down from the mountains, and the

people poured from their close, stifling houses into the dingy streets—of what, alas ! was once the far-famed capital of the largest and most important of the Roman divisions of Gaul—to inhale the cool air ; and to gaze, perchance with envy and admiration, on the picturesque attire and indolent luxury of the occupants of the balconies running along the façade of a few of the houses occupied by the chief citizens of Narbonne. All the inhabitants of that ancient city—so isolated from the world by its peculiar situation—appeared joyous on this calm summer evening. They paused, earnestly discoursing in knots of from three to four, on the margin of the sluggish little stream intersecting the town, which now rippled and flowed forwards with unwonted speed as the light wind arose. The theme, however, of all the loiterers, high and low, was the same : the busy imaginations of all were employed speculating on the arrival and probable stay of a wealthy English nobleman ; whom sickness, apparently, compelled to become a sojourner in their little unfrequented city. Marvellous rumours were likewise afloat of the extraordinary beauty of a fair young girl, his daughter, who appeared to lavish the tenderest care and affection on the invalid.

In days of yore, the birth of an imperial heir, or the pompous pageant of the triumphant entry of some victorious general from foreign conquest, was scarce sufficient to excite the interest of the haughty citizen of Narbonne; but now its modern inhabitants, with most undignified pertinacity, in the hope of catching the slightest glimpse of their wealthy visitors, crowded towards the venerable mansion where they had taken up their abode. But the curiosity of the worthy Narbonnois, if such it were, was doomed to disappointment. The blinds and clumsy wooden shutters of the tall, toppling mansion were closed, and the strangers suffered no outward sign to escape, that they enjoyed or luxuriated in the delicious *fresco* which emptied half the houses in Narbonne.

At the back, however, of this ancient mansion spread a garden teeming with fragrant flowers, rich, varied, and glowing; as different from the sickly produce of our northern green-houses and stoves, as fresh air, space, and the soft dews of heaven could render them. On one side of the garden arose the square towers of the fortress-palace of the Archbishop of Narbonne, and the exquisite Gothic façade of the cathedral,

and all around were spires almost countless: for as the province of Languedoc can boast of possessing many of the richest benefices in France, so could Narbonne then, for its size, glory in the number and wealth of its churches and monastic establishments.

Along the front of the second story of the mansion stretched a broad balcony, terminating at both ends by a flight of stone steps, flanked by a balustrade of rough marble, descending to the garden. On this balcony—or rather terrace, as from its breadth it might be properly called—close to the balustrade, stood a small couch, and on the stone beside lay a pile of faded brocade cushions. A long, narrow window opened on the balcony, the door of which, pushed back, disclosed a small, gloomy-looking apartment, yclept the salon of the mansion, with muslin hangings and a dingy parquet; which, as the worthy Narbonnois, intrenched in their mountain fastness, were still far from having attained the refinement of their more accessible neighbours, had seldom glowed beneath the vigorous exertions of the *frotteur*. The various articles strewn over the table in the centre seemed strangely at variance with the style and general aspect of the

room. There was a piece of embroidery, and silks of every hue in an ivory box by its side. A small book lay open, also, with sketching materials around; and close to them stood a magnificent magnolia, with its large flaky petals expanded over the edge of a vase of turquoise blue, and at the other end of the table lay a huge piece of knitting, with pins like spears thrust through a ball of wool. A large fauteuil and several smaller ones, with a somewhat flecked mirror in a tarnished gold frame, completed the furniture of the apartment.

To return, however, to the balcony: on one of the faded crimson cushions close to the foot of the couch, knelt a young girl; her arms resting on the top of the low parapet, and one hand supporting her head. She was attired in white; and her dress admirably displayed the symmetry of her small rounded bust and slender figure. Rows of delicate lace fell around her throat, confined at the bosom by a rich jewel, and sparkling rings encircled the slight fingers raised to her brow, supporting one of the most graceful little heads imaginable; around which twined shining bands of hair—soft, fine, and black as the purest jet—gathered into a heavy knot behind. Her

complexion was clear olive, with the very faintest tinge of pink colouring the dimpled cheek ; the mouth, small, full, and, perhaps, rather voluptuous in its expression ; and the contour of her face a faultless oval. Her brow was smooth as ivory, rather low than otherwise, but wide and ample ; and the nose small, and delicately moulded. But beautiful and refined as was the Lady Catherine Neville, there was still something more fascinating in the soft deep tones of her voice, and in the impassioned and fervid language which occasionally burst from her lips ; contrasting as it did with the usually calm thoughtfulness of her ordinary demeanour.

Lady Catherine's education had been *soignée*, and cultivated in the highest degree. Her mind was lofty and impetuous, attuned to the soft glowing romance of the south, where she had spent the greater part of her life. Early left to her own guidance by the increasing and fatal malady under which her father laboured, Lady Catherine acquired a courageous and fearless decision of character and action, surprising in one so young ; and these her peculiar circumstances, and the responsibility which attached itself so early to her lot, induced habits of deep reflection,

verging sometimes on melancholy. From her father, broken in health and enfeebled in intellect, she derived little help: in Mrs. Otway, the friend of her childhood, she found an affectionate sympathizer in her difficulties, indeed; but one whose counsel ebbed and flowed as the restless ocean, and shook with every passing breeze. Thus Lady Catherine, ceasing at length to look for aid from those around her, persevered unfalteringly in all things that her own high principle and clear judgment approved without a shadow of a doubt; in all others, where circumstances demanded further counsel, she sought and obtained it in the steady friendship of Lord Alresford, the son of her father's oldest friend, then likewise resident at Venice. Fearlessly the Lady Catherine asked, and eagerly improved, every opportunity for more intimate acquaintance with one whose opinion she so highly appreciated; without the slightest apprehension for her future peace. True, though she had been previously informed by her father of Lord Alresford's engagement to Miss Effingham, and had even heard its acknowledgment from the Earl's own lips, yet still there might have been peril in this familiar intercourse, had not the safeguard slumbered in her own bosom; for the beautiful Lady Catherine

loved passionately, with the whole strength of her enthusiastic, ardent spirit.

Motionless she knelt on the balcony, leaning over the balustrade, as if in deep meditation. More than once her hand swept across her brow, and a restless flash lighted her eye. Presently she laid her head on the end of the couch, and wept convulsively. Around, everything was placid and still, save that now the air vibrated to the musical tinkling of the small vesper bells from the numerous spires and towers throughout the city of Narbonne. Had religion there been pure and undefiled, free from the mockeries of man's superstition, the service of the sanctuary had, indeed, been performed with edifying devotion in this little city, and a perfect incense of prayer and supplication would daily have ascended to the Throne of Mercy; for no less than four hundred ecclesiastics were perpetually employed within its churches, in chanting services, requiems, and masses.

Some quarter of an hour thus elapsed, when the door of the salon opened, and a light step glided towards the balcony. Lady Catherine hurriedly dashed the tears from her eyes, and, half turning, found her friend Mrs. Otway seated just without the window, quietly unrolling her knitting.

"Dear Mrs. Otway," exclaimed she, earnestly, "I hope you left papa tolerably comfortable. Has he not gone to sleep rather earlier than usual, to-night?"

"I wish, my dear, you would try and not worry yourself so terribly. Positively, Lady Catherine, you will fret until you are quite ill. I am beginning to be seriously miserable about you," replied Mrs. Otway, in a tone of exposition, as she gazed on the fair cheek, wet still with traces of recent tears.

"Well—but about papa, Mrs. Otway. How do you think he seems this evening?"

"To tell you the truth, my dear, his Lordship appears strangely uneasy to-night. I read the papers to him for some time; but, as the restlessness did not abate, I summoned Dr. Gordon."

"I must go to him this moment!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, springing to her feet. "Oh, Mrs. Otway, why did you not send for me?" added she, reproachfully.

"Stay, my dear Lady Catherine," said Mrs. Otway, hastily dropping her knitting. "Be not so impetuous, I beseech! Dr. Gordon begged me to leave his Lordship's room, and particularly desired that his patient should not be dis-

turbed again to-night. I assure you, my dear, I left the Doctor sitting by the bedside, with his fingers on Lord Willingham's pulse; and he insisted your father should be left to his care," added Mrs. Otway, as she caught the Lady Catherine's half-doubting glance: aware that the latter more than half suspected her, on many occasions, of being more careful of her pupil's ease, than solicitous that she should act to the strict letter of her duty.

Lady Catherine threw herself on the couch.

"I want you to tell me, Mrs. Otway, what you really think of papa's condition: I mean, since we quitted Venice?" said she, after an interval of a few minutes.

Mrs. Otway hesitated.

"Why your question is rather a difficult one, and I scarcely know how to give my opinion on a case which varies apparently every day. At any rate, my dear, I can so far conscientiously say, I think Lord Willingham has made extraordinary progress during these last few days; and that he seems wonderfully revived again from the attack which compelled us to stay in this wretched place," replied she at length, glancing round the room.

"I trust papa does not find the smallness of

his room here oppressive—so very different to what he has been accustomed to in Italy,” mused Lady Catherine.

“No, I do not think his Lordship feels inconvenienced; but even if he did, you know, my dear, there is no help for it. Dr. Gordon declared it would be death to remove him forwards another stage. Thanks, however, to the Doctor’s medicine-chest, and our own excellent supplies, we have everything requisite for the comfort of our dear invalid: and most fortunate it is; for you will hardly believe, Catherine, Wilmot went into every shop and store throughout this miserable hole, in the vain hope of procuring a little *eau de luce*, which we thought your father would find pleasant during these sultry days.”

“I am not at all surprised. But my dear, kind friend, pray be explicit with me. Dr. Gordon is not sufficiently so, and I fear holds out false hope; therefore tell me, I conjure you, has he ever said anything to you about my father’s case?”

“I fancy Dr. Gordon does not anticipate immediate danger, and trusts Lord Willingham may have strength to bear the journey home; and when once safely arrived at Wardour Court one can scarcely tell what miracle the air may effect.

You must not be daunted, my dear Catherine, by our unlucky break-down here; for really the roads we travelled upon were villainous enough to shake the most robust constitution," said Mrs. Otway, rising, and seating herself on the couch by Lady Catherine.

"Of my dear father's ultimate recovery, I have long, long despaired: but a dread presentiment pursues me, that some fatal catastrophe will happen here. God grant my fears may not be realized!" said Lady Catherine, covering her face with her hands.

"It was certainly most unfortunate that the Earl insisted on this foolish journey through the south of France, on his way home. Oh! how I wish we were safely arrived there!" exclaimed Mrs. Otway.

"Should this dreadful calamity happen, what is to become of me?" observed Lady Catherine, abstractedly.

"We will go home to Wardour Court, dearest."

"Home!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, with a sigh, and the words lingered bitterly on her beautiful lips. "Yes; but I am a stranger there! Who will welcome me back? What heart anticipates my arrival, or who will care whether I go

or stay away? My own recollections of Wardour Court are vague and faint: I connect always its idea with a dark, cloister-looking mansion, smooth-shaven lawns, dark woods, sombre alleys,—in fact, everything dismal!”

“If you learn to love Wardour Court as well as your dear mother did, Catherine, you will find every comfort and happiness there: to this very day, as you know, her name is beloved amongst the tenantry,” cried Mrs. Otway, earnestly. “But, my dear, I have a suggestion to offer. I think you ought to write immediately to Lord Alresford: though, perhaps, as that little head treasures matchless wisdom, you may have done so already.”

“No, indeed, I have not; but I will follow your advice to-morrow.”

Mrs. Otway smiled, well pleased, that she had for once given her beloved *élève* a piece of valuable counsel.

“Wardour Court and Amesbury are quite close together,” continued she, complacently. “Ah! I do nothing but perpetually regret that noble looking Lord Alresford should be betrothed to Lord Elvaston’s daughter. What a delightful marriage it would have been for you, my dear?”

“Nay; here you and I must differ, my dear,

old friend," said Lady Catherine, laughing. "Do you know I never suspected you of half such romantic nonsense. No, no; Lord Alresford and I, though we bear each other most warm friendship, are the very last persons in the world to fall in love: our intimacy has been far too real, open, and free from illusion."

"Do you think Lord Alresford is really attached to Miss Effingham, Catherine?"

"Yes, I am certain of it. I understand the marriage is soon to take place."

Mrs. Otway raised her eyes earnestly to Lady Catherine's face, and in so doing let half a dozen stitches or so drop off her pin: for the kind-hearted old lady had long set her heart, and puzzled her brains, to devise a scheme which should elevate her pupil to the rank of spouse to the man whom she so much admired and revered.

"Positively, the stitches in this tiresome scarlet stripe have slipped again! I declare, these tinkling bells are enough to distract the most skilful knitter in Christendom! One might just as comfortably be seated in a belfry as on this terrace," exclaimed Mrs. Otway, wrathfully, seizing the first *casus belli* which presented itself.

Lady Catherine quietly took the knitting, and soon restored the stitches on the pin.

"Thank you, my darling. You are always ready to assist me in all my difficulties," said Mrs. Otway, fondly kissing her forehead. "The Conways, your old playfellows, will rejoice to see you home again, I am sure. Don't you remember, Catherine, in all your juvenile sports, the young Lord Normanton used to call himself your champion, and sustain your rights most gallantly?"

"Yes; he was a fine, noble-spirited boy. How very odd I should so completely have lost sight of them all! Maude Conway, I remember, a fair cherub of a child, with flaxen hair and blue eyes. I dare say, I shall not recognise any again."

"Then, my dear, there is your cousin, Mr. Egremont Turville; who, having gained his cause, intends to settle at Nethercote. Did you read the letter he wrote to your papa last week? He seems quite enchanted at the prospect of your speedy return."

"Yes; but why he should be, astonished me when I read his letter. Mr. Turville has never seen papa for many years, and me not at all," said Lady Catherine, languidly.

"Well, I think I have satisfactorily proved we shall be objects of interest to somebody. Besides, my dear, I presume you do not intend to pass your life in single blessedness?" added the old lady, somewhat slyly.

Lady Catherine's fair face flushed.

"I suppose I shall follow the destiny of most women, and marry some day," said she, faintly.

"I think it a very likely thing, too, my beautiful child!" rejoined Mrs. Otway, with a triumphant smile, as she gazed in the lovely, pensive face turned towards her. "But, tell me, Catherine, are there none of the heap of suitors introduced to your notice by your aunt, Madame de Pezzaro, sufficiently emboldened to follow you, after a space, to England?"

"Nay; tell me first which you approved of most," said Lady Catherine, evasively, turning away her head.

"Well, then, there was the Count Von Leinen-dorf."

"A conceited blockhead, perpetually dreaming of his forty-seven quarterings; and who actually did me the honour to inform me that I was indebted for the sublime offer of his hand to the flattering fact that my lozenge would admirably fill a vacant corner in his shield."

"Then, what do you say to the Prince of Aveiro?"

"Worse and worse. The Prince has been a widower twice; and, as the Count obligingly informed me, possesses half a dozen children or more, reared in the solitude of some Calabrian stronghold."

"Then were the Condesa's efforts totally fruitless? I must own, I took a great fancy to our intelligent countryman, Mr. Randolph," rejoined Mrs. Otway; taking a furtive, sidelong glance at the countenance of her young friend.

"Yes; Mr. Randolph was of a far different calibre to my Italian suitors, doubtless," replied Lady Catherine, blushing deeply.

"He has such very winning manners. I protest, the sound of his frank, joyous voice recalled old times, I cannot tell you how vividly. But, Catherine, did Mr. Randolph leave no other impression upon you than that of a very agreeable acquaintance?"

Lady Catherine appeared strongly agitated, and her head sank again on the couch.

"Never mind, my dear, never mind: don't answer my question," exclaimed Mrs. Otway, quickly. "I dare say, some day I shall know all. We won't talk any more about Mr. Randolph."

"Nay; you shall know all about it now, my dear old friend. So, to cut a long story short, we found out somehow we both loved; and — the fact is, we have plighted faith to each other," cried Lady Catherine, impetuously, seizing Mrs. Otway's hand, while bright tears glittered in her dark eyes.

"Lady Catherine! My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Otway, in consternation, the knitting gliding from her fingers to the ground. "What is it you tell me? Have you reflected well? Does Lord Willingham know of this engagement?"

"Mr. Randolph is a great favourite with papa."

"Yes; but does he think him a sufficient match for you, Lady Catherine? Everybody must allow he is a most fascinating young man, but —"

"But what?"

"Why, in my opinion, there is something very mysterious about Mr. Randolph. It is most extraordinary that, although he is received in the best society and is apparently wealthy and high born, nobody really knows who and what he is. Even Madame de Pezzaro used every effort to discover his family before she admitted him into her set, and totally failed; and you are aware your aunt is not a person to be easily foiled."

"It is not very likely that Mr. Randolph, if he has reasons for wishing to preserve his incognito, should suffer it to be bruited in my aunt's clique."

"No; but, my dear Catherine, when I remarked his great attention to you, I took every opportunity to draw from him, if possible, some account of himself; and, I confess, I was highly amused at the ingenious manner he parried my queries. When I fancied I had gained one little point, some casual remark of his would launch me again as far from the fact as ever. Depend upon it, my dear, he must have some mighty interest in concealing his past history; and unless Mr. Randolph explains all this clearly, forgive me if I declare my opinion to be that you ought to put an end to the affair at once. Now, I ask you, my dear, is this the case? Has Mr. Randolph explained all to your satisfaction?" said Mrs. Otway, waxing warm; for the danger she foresaw to her beloved pupil's future peace in this kind of unsatisfactory engagement aroused her energy.

"Mr. Randolph has explained nothing: but I love him, and therefore trust him!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, firmly, raising her head from the sofa pillow, while her cheek glowed.

“And has Lord Willingham actually consented to the marriage on these terms?” exclaimed Mrs. Otway in dismay, in a tone which indicated she conceived the Earl had fairly taken leave of his senses.

“Papa has consented to my marriage only on condition Mr. Randolph explains these mysteries; so, pray, do not look so very concerned, dear Mrs. Otway,” replied Lady Catherine, flinging her arm round the kind old lady’s neck. “Mr. Randolph promised to leave for England six months after we quitted Italy, and it was arranged he should visit Wardour Court: though he did half engage to see us once more at Bourdeaux, ere we embarked.”

“*A la bonne heure, darling,*” exclaimed Mrs. Otway, her face once more radiant with smiles. “I thought neither you nor Lord Willingham could be so woefully rash. I trust with all my heart, that this handsome, engaging Mr. Randolph may succeed in making his case clear; for I think, next to Lord Alresford, he would be just the very husband for you, dear. I should not be surprised any day to see him arrive here.”

“Perhaps he may,” replied Lady Catherine, whilst a blush of conscious security stole over her beautiful face. “Let us go down into the garden, the flowers look so very inviting.”

"Well, my dear, if anybody deserves to be happy, it is you, I am sure," replied Mrs. Otway, kissing her glowing cheek. "Ah! I think I hear Dr. Gordon's step in the next room, so if you will excuse me, I will now just ask him a few questions about the Earl: and Catherine, it occurred to me some days ago, that there are some Randolphs whom I have heard a Scotch friend of mine frequently mention; so instead of joining you in the garden, after my little conversation is over with the Doctor, I will write a few lines to Mrs. Macleod, and desire her to ascertain whether any of these Randolphs are abroad."

Lady Catherine smiled assent; for she knew how dearly her old friend loved to imagine herself overwhelmed with important business.

"You will mind and not remain out in the garden too late, Catherine, for night dews are always injurious: besides, in this queer place one does not know what loathsome reptiles may be lurking amid those masses of tangled grass and foliage yonder," said Mrs. Otway, as she lingered a moment before passing into the salon.

Lady Catherine, for a little space after she was gone, remained in deep meditation on the sofa. She then arose, and throwing a large black lace shawl over her head and shoulders, bounded down

the steps into the garden. She strolled slowly along in the direction of a grove of almonds she had observed in her previous rambles; the rich green foliage of tall orange trees forming a wall on either side of the narrow alley through which her path lay. Beautiful flowers expanded their parched leaves to gather the heavy refreshing dew, and the air was laden with the delicious fragrance of countless orange blossoms, drooping and glistening amid the dark glossy foliage like transparent pearl drops. Lady Catherine wandered on in a perfect ecstasy of delight, until she came to a more clear and open space, when she threw herself on a seat, and prepared thoroughly to enjoy the scene. In the midst of the lawn, a small fountain bubbled up, scattering around a vapour of sparkling spray. Behind arose the majestic battlements and towers of the cathedral; which appeared so near, that she almost imagined she could trace its deep shadows in the fitful moonlight beaming around; and on looking more earnestly, she at length perceived that in fact a high hedge of eglantine, and other prickly bushes, only separated its enclosure from the garden. She sat thus for a few minutes, but suddenly started nervously to her feet, as a dark shadow glided from under the covert of the

hedge, and moved rapidly forwards in the direction of the plot of grass of which the fountain formed the centre. Lady Catherine gathered her shawl closely round her, and darted forwards towards the house. The figure quickened its pace also, but presently she heard her own name uttered in a voice which sent the blood with a thrill to her heart. She paused, and hurriedly threw the veil from her head; but ere she could articulate a syllable, she found herself clasped in the arms of Mr. Randolph.

“Catherine, dearest!”

“Oh, Frederic, you terrified me so! What can bring you hither in this mysterious manner?” said Lady Catherine, raising her head from her lover’s shoulder.

“Nay, Catherine, I pray you, look not so scared,” exclaimed Mr. Randolph, lightly kissing again and again her glowing cheek, and drawing her gently towards the bench, from which she had fled on his approach. “How is Lord Willingham to-night?”

“Dear papa is a little better to-day, but I cannot, alas! flatter myself the amendment is permanent. But, Frederic, I am all impatience to learn how you discovered us in this remote place; for you cannot have received my letter: besides, what

can be the meaning of your extraordinary apparition in this garden?"

"Your first query is easily explained; I did receive your note, Catherine."

Lady Catherine made a gesture of surprise.

"Luckily," continued Mr. Randolph, "I met your messenger, dearest, at Marseilles; for in truth, I should have been sorely perplexed on arriving at Bourdeaux not to find you there, so without an instant's delay I travelled hither. Is it now Dr. Gordon's opinion, Catherine, that your father will have strength enough to reach England?"

"Dr. Gordon thinks there is slight hope. He greatly builds, I believe, on the beneficial effect of the sea-voyage home."

"And afterwards, Catherine?"

"Afterwards!" and the word faltered on her trembling lip; "afterwards, I shall be an orphan, desolate, in a land of strangers!"

"Lord Willingham loves you dearly, Catherine——"

A low sob burst from her lips.

"His loss will entail upon you severe affliction."

"Severe affliction! Say rather it will be a calamity, which will cast its shadow over the

remainder of my life!" exclaimed Lady Catherine vehemently.

"Dearest Catherine, do you then know none of the people amongst whom this terrible bereavement will probably happen?" asked Mr. Randolph, in a low voice. "Who, then, will comfort and console you?"

"Mrs. Otway; and shall I not have—Oh, Frederic, what mean you? Why torture me thus?" said she, in a voice of agony; suddenly pausing as the thought flashed through her brain, that perhaps he who could thus speculate on her anguish, might be there to bid her farewell for ever.

"Catherine, have you reflected on my proposal at Venice, which you promised to answer ere you sailed for England?" whispered Mr. Randolph, in a voice nearly as agitated as her own, seizing her hand, and drawing her towards him until her head rested on his bosom.

Lady Catherine started.

"Catherine, do you love me? Ay, you have said so: you have sworn so; and yet you hesitate!" exclaimed Mr. Randolph, impatiently, as she still continued silent. "At this crisis, will you reject a love and an affection devoted to you? Speak!"

Lady Catherine raised her head. Her cheek

was white almost as the pale moonlight around, but her voice, though low, was firm.

"Frederic, the memory of that last interview haunts me always; for it was wrong in me ever to allow you to suppose I would entertain such a design. I have reflected; I cannot consent to what you propose."

"But your father sanctions our union! Has he not consented? Catherine, my beloved, give me the right to console; for why suffer a foolish scruple of propriety to intervene between vows, which once spoken would bring such abundant consolation?"

"Remember, my father's consent was but conditional," murmured Lady Catherine.

"Perhaps the Lady Catherine Neville repents that she has pledged her faith to one unknown, untitled,—one, in short, whom report has more than once proclaimed plebeian," said Mr. Randolph, coldly.

"Frederic, why torture me thus? You know you are unjust, cruel! Have I ever deserved so harsh a taunt?"

"Is your love, then, as truthful and strong, Catherine, as during that calm Sicilian sunset, when you plighted to me this hand? Do you repent?"

“No! I repent not of what I then promised? To you alone have I given myself. Why, knowing this, you choose to continue mysterious still, I know not, Frederic; but, whatever be your position, if you are such as I believe you—one whom I can reverence and honour—I am yours always!” exclaimed she, vehemently.

“If you love me, Catherine, as I would be loved, you place implicit trust in my word; and those explanations I promised to satisfy the natural anxiety of your father are as nothing to you. Is it so, my beloved?”

“I believe you incapable of aught dishonourable.”

“Then trust me, Catherine, when I solemnly tell you, a marriage with me will be no derogation to your high rank; and that your father, should he survive to witness its avowal, will joyfully give us his sanction and blessing.”

“Oh, if so, I entreat, conjure you, dissipate at once the mystery which surrounds you; and then, with my father’s consent, I may even now be yours before we leave for England!” and her beautiful cheek glowed with eager expectation, as she glanced into his face.

“If you truly love me—if you trust me, Catherine, knowing that Lord Willingham gives his con-

sent to our union on conditions I pledge you my sacred word shall be fulfilled, you will be mine without further pressing me to violate a solemn vow,—a vow which ensures the personal safety, nay, perhaps, the life of another, and which binds me to secrecy on all concerning myself during the next six months. Think of the agony of our separation for so long a period—the period also of mourning for your dear father: during which, I could not comfort, or console you! Imagine the torment of knowing you far away from me, so young, so fair, beset with suitors, and I without a legal claim to silence their presumptuous hopes! Dear Catherine, if you indeed love me, doom me not to such agonizing suspense! Let a secret tie now bind us—”

“ I dare not. No, no! Shall I give the right, the power, to any man living to draw me from my highest duty of consoling my dear father, and watching by his bed during the few hours which remain to him here? Shall I be guilty of such treachery?”

“ Nay, hearken, Catherine: if you yield to my prayer, I solemnly promise you shall be free from wedded law until I publicly claim you as my bride.”

Lady Catherine trembled violently. Mr. Ran-

dolph anxiously watched her. Suddenly she started from her seat, while every nerve quivered with excitement.

"This cannot be, Frederic!" exclaimed she, with desperate courage. "I am the last of an ancient, a noble line; it would be criminal—nay, worse than criminal—even believing you, as I do, worthy, honourable, and akin to the noblest of my ancestors,—to give their honours to one unknown, and ——"

"An adventurer, you would say, Lady Catherine Neville. Your own conscience shall now decide whether my test has not exposed the little sincerity of your affection. You do well, indeed, to refuse the suit of a man, in whose truth and integrity you have not the firmest confidence," replied Mr. Randolph, haughtily.

"Forgive me. I meant not this!" exclaimed she.

"Catherine, dear Catherine, I love you too sincerely, too deeply, to urge you to any act prejudicial to your welfare," said Mr. Randolph, as he fondly kissed the agitated brow of his betrothed. "I relied so much on my influence with you, and your affection for me, dearest, that — thinking at this critical period you would not refuse the protection of one chosen by yourself, and

sanctioned by your father as your husband—I even presumed to make preparation for our instant marriage: my friend Mr. Clare—whom you may remember, Catherine—awaits us in the cathedral; which, though a Romish church, is still the temple of God. Let us go to him, dearest!”

“Tempt me not! I cannot—I dare not!” exclaimed Lady Catherine passionately, sinking again on the seat, while tears dropped fast on her white dress. She raised her eyes imploringly, and saw such an expression of keen reproach on her lover’s face, that she involuntarily buried her own in her hands.

“Catherine,” said he, at length, in low, earnest tones, “you distrust, reject, banish me from you! May you never wish the events of this evening recalled! Farewell. When I also visit England, perhaps it may be to find you the bride of another—of him, doubtless, whom you have probably now summoned to your aid.”

Astonishment, for a second, checked the sobs which shook Lady Catherine’s frame.

“Lord Alresford! You surely know he is engaged to another,” murmured she, faintly.

“Yet he loves you deeply, fervently, Lady Catherine.”

She shook her head incredulously.

"Perhaps you also deceive yourself as to your feelings towards him! Farewell, Catherine!" said Mr. Randolph, in low, mournful accents, as he folded her to his bosom, and pressed his lips to hers: they were cold as marble. He then replaced her on the bench, and after gazing on her a moment, moved away. She uttered a low cry—and his name burst from her lips. He was instantly at her side.

"Leave me not. I know not what I say or do. I am very miserable," uttered she, in low unsteady tones, sweeping her hand across her brow. "Frederic!" said she, earnestly, "this evening I swear to become yours—now tell me this mystery."

A bright smile of hope and exultation beamed on Mr. Randolph's face.

"A few months from this period, I will meet you again under your own roof of Wardour Court, to claim you openly; then you shall know all. Till then, let it suffice you, dearest, that I love you beyond the power of words to express! Now, my Catherine, as you have given yourself irrevocably to me, come—let us hasten, or Mrs. Otway will be alarmed at your long absence," exclaimed Mr. Randolph, hastily folding her shawl about her, and throwing his arm round her waist. Ere she had

time for remonstrance or hesitation, he swiftly carried, rather than led her, through an aperture cut in the hedge, carefully hidden by straggling branches, and in a very brief space they stood before a low, narrow doorway, nearly concealed by one of the projecting buttresses of the magnificent cathedral of Narbonne.

"Stay, Frederic, stay!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, breathlessly, laying her hand upon Mr. Randolph's arm, already outstretched to push back the door—"one minute! What is your real—your true name?" and she darted a piercing look of inquiry into his face.

Mr. Randolph smiled: he fondly took the little hand resting so nervously on his arm, and carried it to his lips.

"Be at peace, dear one. Randolph is, indeed, my own, my true name. Why should you doubt it?"

"And the whole of it?" persisted Lady Catherine, very earnestly.

Mr. Randolph, apparently, did not hear her query; for at this moment the door yielded to his touch, and they stood within the majestic cathedral. The transepts and side aisles were enveloped in gloom, but the clear moonbeams shone through the rich painted windows, and

chequered the marble pavement of the choir with luminous patches of crimson, amber, and blue. The bases of many of the columns dividing the nave from the aisles were also bathed in soft radiance, fitfully streaming up the fluted shafts, while the graceful pointed arches soaring one above the other were lost in shadowy obscurity, and the eye vainly sought to penetrate the gloomy vastness beyond. Lady Catherine stood gazing with a feeling of solemn awe. All around appeared wrapped in calm, immoveable repose ; and she involuntarily clung closer to her lover's arm, as their shadows glided mysteriously, swiftly, before them on the pavement, and the soft light trembled in strange relief on each marble statue in its sculptured niche as they passed.

"Would you fear, dearest, to await me here for a few brief moments?" whispered Mr. Randolph, as they reached the high altar; and Lady Catherine sank on the steps overpowered with mingled awe, and secret apprehension.

She silently bowed her head, and Mr. Randolph vanished from her side. For a second or two she sat spell bound where he left her ; a kind of mysterious panic seemed gradually creeping over her senses, and she involuntarily shuddered, and hid her face in the folds of her shawl. Presently she

threw it from her, and gazed nervously around. Beyond the choir all appeared a long, dark, interminable vista of gloom. Just before her, at a few yards distance, exactly before the high altar, arose a magnificent mausoleum of white marble. She arose and approached nearer. Around were bas reliefs sculptured in marble, and the moon's rays rendered the figures strikingly prominent. The subject on which the artist appeared to have lavished so much skill, was a funereal cortège; the stately convoy, the train of mourners, male and female, in their long flowing mantles and hoods, the pompous funeral car, the blazing torches, were all depicted with vivid distinctness. On one side of the tomb was an inscription in large golden Gothic letters. Lady Catherine read in a gaze fascinated into steadiness—

“SEPULCRUM BONÆ MEMORIÆ
PHILIPPI,
QUONDAM FRANCORUM REGIS,
FILII BEATI LUDOVICI.”

Upon the tomb lay a recumbent figure of the monarch. The moonbeams lighted up the features distinctly; but so calm and phantomlike did the pale effigy appear, bathed in the clustering rays, that she stood gazing upon it almost spell-bound.

Gradually, her beautiful head sank on the tomb. A few minutes thus elapsed, and the Lady Catherine was roused from her painful reverie by the sound of approaching footsteps; and soon she discovered—she scarcely knew how, so rapid had been the transition—that her tears no longer flowed on the chill marble, but her cheek rested on the bosom of her lover, and Mr. Randolph's lips murmured words of love and encouragement in her ear.

“Catherine, my beloved! all is ready, and Mr. Clare awaits us. Come!”

“Oh, Frederic, Frederic! must this—must this really be? Do you, indeed, exact so fearful a proof of love?” exclaimed she, in low tones of extreme distress.

“Exact! no, Catherine. But is it possible a few brief moments have again shaken your confidence in me?” said Mr. Randolph, mournfully.

“No, no,” murmured she, hurriedly; “yet, strange thoughts flitted across me during your absence. My father——”

“Has given his consent: is it not so, my Catherine? therefore, we violate no duty by these our hasty espousals,” exclaimed Mr. Randolph, once more throwing his arm round her.

Gently, though resolutely, he led her forwards,

and in a few seconds they stood within a small chapel, brilliantly illumined by the glare of some half dozen torches. It was the chapel dedicated to St. Charles Borromeo—that holy and saintly bishop, who, during the awful pestilence in Milan, held his life cheap, so that he might win souls to God; and who, by his heavenly charity and priestly benediction, soothed the dying agonies of many a poor penitent, when even the majority of the priesthood, scared by the frightful mortality, fled from the devoted city, deserting their flocks, their bishop, and the few courageous brethren who nobly remained to share his fate, and aid his pious labours.

Lady Catherine threw a hasty, bewildered glance around. She perceived that, besides Mr. Clare, who had once been introduced to her before as a clergyman of the Church of England, and Mr. Randolph's former tutor, and travelling companion and friend, there were two or three persons present. Mr. Clare, arrayed in priestly vestments, hastily advanced towards them as they entered; he said something, but nearly sinking to the ground with agitation and excitement, she heard not its purport. Mr. Randolph hurriedly threw his arm round her, and motioning to Mr. Clare, led her to a low, square block of stone in the centre of the chapel, on which rested an open book. Soon,

solemn words fell in low, emphatic accents from the lips of Mr. Clare. Lady Catherine, with her head bowed low, and her small hands clasped together, stood by, or rather leaned on him to whom she was about to vow unswerving fidelity. Not a tear moistened her eyes, and their long lashes rested on a cheek flushed, and burning with fevered agitation. Mechanically she repeated the words required of her; but not even at the voice of him she loved so well, did she venture to raise her eyes. The whole appeared a dream; her head swam, and the hot blood rushed to her brow. The words presently ceased:—a paper was laid before her, a pen placed between her trembling fingers, and she was told to write her name. His voice murmured the request; she instinctively obeyed, and it was all over. The Lady Catherine Neville, Lord Willingham's proud, beautiful heiress, had plighted her faith to one unknown!

Gradually, then, the vivid colour faded from her cheek, as she fell back into Mr. Randolph's arms; her fair head drooped, and she fainted.

When Lady Catherine revived, she found herself on the same rustic bench in the garden which she had sought on quitting Mrs. Otway; then, little thinking, in the lightness of her heart, as

she tripped so joyously along the orange-bowered walk, that the following hour was to be the hour of her destiny : the hour which would colour all her future ones ; the harbinger of weal or woe ; of bliss to come, or of misery irretrievable. A gentle breeze had sprung up, and the soft night wind murmured, and crept with rustling sound amid the beautiful foliage, and wafted around the delicious perfume of the rich southern vegetation.

And she lay in her husband's arms and wept : wept as if her whole heart would dissolve itself in tears.

The Cathedral clock struck eleven. They had just been absent half an hour from the garden.

Lady Catherine started.

"Mrs. Otway will be seeking me. Dear Frederic, you must suffer me to say farewell ! Indeed, I need repose. Think of the wearing anxiety of the last four months," exclaimed she, falteringly, striving to disengage herself from his arms.

"One moment longer, Catherine, my own—my wife ! Listen ! I must see you secretly and frequently after your return to England. Will you promise, by the love you have vowed, that when you receive the remaining portion of this clasp, you will meet me wherever I indicate ?"

and Mr. Randolph hastily passed round the slender throat of his bride a thin gold chain. Appended to it was a small circular clasp, in fashion resembling the ancient Roman fibula, or brooch, richly studded with diamonds and sapphires. In the centre, Mr. Randolph's cipher was wrought in jewels; but between the initial letters, so as to divide them exactly in the middle, was a tiny medallion of fine blue enamel, surrounded by a wreath of diamonds, bearing the single letter "C."

"Indeed, dear Frederic, I promise faithfully. It will be the only consolation left to me," murmured Lady Catherine, as Mr. Randolph divided the clasp. She hastily hid the part hanging to the chain in her bosom; and they moved slowly towards the house.

"You will stay and see dear papa?" said Lady Catherine hesitatingly, raising her earnest eyes to his face.

"Certainly, my love. I will go with you and shake hands with Mrs. Otway this evening, and to-morrow I hope to see Lord Willingham."

"And, Frederic, I have another thing to mention," said Lady Catherine, pausing suddenly, and blushing. "I shall be obliged to write and summon Lord Alresford hither immediately. Papa

is continually asking for him ; and Mrs. Otway reminded me of it this evening."

A slight, a very slight shadow darkened Mr. Randolph's handsome brow.

" Lord Alresford is your father's executor, Catherine, I believe. Summon him then, dearest, if you judge it necessary," said he, after a pause.

They had now nearly reached the house ; a clump of shrubs and evergreens, around which the walk wound, separated them only from the steps of the balcony. All at once the sound of Mrs. Otway's shrill voice, summoning the Lady Catherine in more agitating accents than was her wont, smote on their ear, as they still lingered arm-in-arm, unwilling to suffer aught to interrupt the deep happiness which filled their hearts.

" Mrs. Otway !" exclaimed Lady Catherine, darting forwards. On the steps she met her friend. " Here I am, dear Mrs. Otway. Oh ! what is it ? Tell me—quick !"

" Oh, nothing very urgent, my dear. Nay, Catherine, pray do not frighten yourself, my dearest love," exclaimed the old lady, imploringly ; though she appeared herself very fluttered and uncomfortable.

" My father !"

" Well, I see I had best tell you at once. Dr.

Gordon, my dear, considers within this last hour a most unfavourable change has taken place in your father's condition; and he thinks Lord Alresford ought to be sent for immediately. Shall I write, my dear, whilst you go to Lord Willingham? You will find a sad, sad change. Oh! my Catherine, what a troublous world this is of ours!" said kind Mrs. Otway, while tears slowly streamed down her cheeks.

Lady Catherine did not utter a sound, but sank against the balustrade.

"Bless me! Mr. Randolph! Is it possible?" suddenly cried Mrs. Otway, starting forwards and looking as if she harboured a strong suspicion she was addressing some supernatural visitant.

"Yes, 'tis I indeed, Mrs. Otway; and, though unexpected, I trust not the less welcome."

"Indeed, Mr. Randolph, we are truly glad to see you," said the old lady, advancing, and extending her hand; "though I fear, under our present circumstances, we can but give you a mournful welcome. Ah, I perceive what has detained that dear child out so late, until her cheek rivals the lily," added she, watching Lady Catherine's wavering colour and languid eye.

The door of the sitting-room here sharply opened, and Dr. Gordon appeared.

"Mrs. Otway, where is Lady Catherine Neville? She ought to be immediately informed of the very serious alteration in his lordship's condition," said he, hurriedly, disappearing again.

Lady Catherine instantly arose.

"To-morrow," murmured she, as Mr. Randolph for a second bent over her and pressed her hand in his. "But you will not be far, if —— if ——" her pale lip quivered, and she hastily quitted the room.

Twenty-four hours elapsed, and Lord Willingham was dead.

CHAPTER VIII.

"WHAT a nuisance a wet day is in the country ! Do you think it will clear up, Sir Gerard ?" exclaimed Miss Effingham, strolling towards one of the windows before taking her seat at the breakfast table, on the day but one following her walk in the park with her betrothed.

"The morning does not certainly look very promising as yet, but I see a feeble gleam to the right yonder, over that fir plantation, which appears as if the sun were lingering but for a favourable moment to drive these provoking clouds away ; so I think there is hope yet, Miss Effingham," replied Sir Gerard, approaching the window, and gazing out also on the dreary morning.

The rain fell in swift, bright drops on the large panes ; and the wind, with gusty murmur, swayed here and there the green boughs, and piteously

tossed the beautiful shrubs on the smooth lawn, fresh and verdant from the torrents which had fallen in the night as during the earliest days of spring. The air was warm, and fragrant with the refreshing vapour steaming from the heated, parched earth, and a thick, drizzling kind of mist hung over the lake and the distant glades, and avenues of the park. In short, never did morning of more unpromising aspect dawn, and gentle Lady Elvaston, though she loved the blue sky and bright sun as well, or better, than most people, never felt more thankful in her life than when she first awoke and heard the wind blow, and the rain drip and patter; while Aglaë, in answer to her eager queries on the state of the elements, when she came to open the bed-room shutters, replied,—

“ Ah, milédi, il fait vraiment un temps affreux ! C’est une matinée à faire peur,—quite an English morning—wet, drarie, and dismal.”

“ Such a contrast to the last three or four beautiful days,” moaned Mildred, still at the window.

Sir Gerard appeared highly amused at her despairing accents.

“ I am sure Miss Tennyson ought to be highly flattered at the interest you take in her pic-nic—or what shall I call it ? If she carries her friends

off to Fernley this dripping day, I hope her conscience may not be burdened by their rheumatic pains and aches, as I feel mine to be by the sufferings of your pretty friend, Helen Campbell. I must run down to Greysdon, as soon as breakfast is over, and try and make my peace with Mrs. Campbell."

"It really was very thoughtless of you, Sir Gerard, to keep her out so late in the boat the other evening, without even the protection of an extra wrapper. Poor Helen is as hoarse as a raven this morning, and was so feverish besides last night, that I began to be seriously uncomfortable."

"You do not surely mean to tell me Miss Campbell is worse this morning?" exclaimed Sir Gerard, with considerable anxiety expressed on his handsome, good-humoured face.

"No,—on the contrary, I am rejoiced to say she is decidedly better. I have just been to see her, and have given her leave to come down stairs by lunch time; so pray do not look so unhappy, Sir Gerard: but when she makes her appearance do your best to show your contrition by making yourself as useful and agreeable to our dear invalid as possible," said Mildred, laughing.

"You shall see what a capital nurse I can make. But you are placing monstrous confidence in my honour; for if you render the punishment so very pleasant, I fear I shall be sorely tempted to repeat my offence. Miss Campbell is so very good natured and amiable."

"Good natured and amiable! I have a great mind to quarrel with you seriously, Sir Gerard, for using such very commonplace terms in your commendation of my friend. Helen Campbell is an angel; and as good as she is pretty and refined!" exclaimed Mildred.

"And I am sure, also, she has a noble, generous-hearted friend; which is a boon that falls to few," rejoined Sir Gerard, warmly.

"See, there is a little break in the clouds yonder, and they appear altogether less dense and compact: a gloomy morning is often followed by a sunshiny day. I shall be so delighted for Clara Tennyson's sake, who would be wofully disappointed at the failure of this riding party; especially as she did not see you when she called, Sir Gerard," said Mildred, blushing.

"But you know I must stay at home and nurse Miss Campbell, *malgré* the regrets of the divine Clara!"

"You will have your revenge, Sir Gerard; for,

luckily, Mildred must likewise stay and aid you, of course, since this rainy morning puts the Fernley expedition quite out of the question. But, my dear Mildred, breakfast is quite ready. I wish you would take your post and pour out the coffee," said Lady Elvaston.

"Clara will never give up the expedition for this slight rain, mamma; the clouds are breaking, and I predict we shall have glorious sunshine at noon," said Miss Effingham, casting one lingering look over the misty landscape, as she slowly moved from the window. "Think how splendid the old trees behind the Abbey will look, glistening with raindrops! and how romantic it will be! Clara will be in raptures!" exclaimed she, with a light laugh.

"Oh, doubtless she will: you should add also Miss Effingham, when all her party stand huddled together in a picturesque group, wet to the skin. The ladies, with their veils and fair ringlets dabbled in rain, and the ground sinking like a bog at every step! How charming to alight and perambulate, umbrella in hand, the grassy courts, and cloisters of the Abbey!"

"Really, Sir Gerard, you always contrive to draw such ridiculous pictures," said Mildred, with a laugh; though Sir Gerard fancied it was not so

unconstrained as usual. "You know very well we need be reduced to none of these deplorable straits. Could we not have the carriage, mamma, to follow us to the Abbey in case of any desperate extremity?"

Lady Elvaston hesitated: she had never been in the habit of opposing or offering any impediment to the wishes of her only and idolized child; but now she felt herself waxing strong in opposition to a scheme which would again throw her darling Mildred into the society of the fascinating Colonel Sutherland.

"Certainly, my dear Mildred, the carriage is at your disposal: but, indeed, I cannot consent to your endangering your precious health by this foolish project of Clara Tennyson's. I shall, therefore, write a note immediately after breakfast, and despatch it to Settringham with your excuses, my love," replied Lady Elvaston, firmly.

Mildred's colour rose: she continued sipping her coffee; but there lurked a calm determination in her eye, which did not escape the notice of Sir Gerard Baynton, who was sitting beside her.

"Clara Tennyson has always some ridiculous fancies and schemes. Poor girl! she thinks they make her of importance. But it is quite out of the question your thinking of going to-day, Mil-

dred. I cannot conceive what novelty you find in these ruins. I believe I have ridden with you there some hundred times ; so, my dear Milly, do not distress us by talking about it more," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, looking up from his paper.

" But, dearest papa, I promised Clara so very faithfully ; and, see, the weather is clearing, and the sun actually struggling down to dry up this deluge. We shall have such a delightful ride. Pray, let me go !" exclaimed Mildred, caressingly, in those tones her indulgent father could never resist ; while Lady Elvaston, finding her daughter had formed one of her energetic resolves, ceased to offer any very strenuous opposition.

" Come, Alresford, your coffee and grill will be cold before you have finished the perusal of that heap of letters. I hope you have good news from Wardour Court of your pretty ward, Lady Catherine Neville ?" said Lord Elvaston, addressing the Earl ; who, since the arrival of the post-bag, leant in the embrasure of the opposite window to that where Mildred had stationed herself, busily reading his numerous letters. Sir Gerard fancied—though, to be sure, he might be mistaken—that his friend, for reasons known only to himself, found more interest in watching the actions of the fair young

girl before him, than in the delicate closely-written pages in his hand.

"Thank you; Lady Catherine is quite well; though she writes in depressed spirits, for her friend Mrs. Otway has been seriously indisposed," replied Lord Alresford, pushing aside his letters, and taking the vacant chair near Lady Elvaston, "I really must apologize for my inattention, Lady Elvaston."

"Pray, do not think that necessary."

"May I now inquire, Mildred, what this expedition is, on which you appear so stedfastly resolved?" said Lord Alresford, with a smile, rising and bringing his cup to her.

Mildred did not, could not speak. She silently filled the cup, and hastily withdrew her fair hand, as it momentarily came in contact with that of her betrothed. There could now no longer be any reasonable doubt as to the Earl's intimate *liaison* with the mistress of Wardour Court. They corresponded! The hand of Lady Catherine had filled those miniature sheets of paper with lines written closely and finely, as with the pen of a fairy. Who could pretend now to deny their intimacy? No, not even her sceptical friend Helen Campbell!

Meanwhile, the day was clearing. The heavy-

clouds burst, and rolled gradually away, and the damp grey mist vanished. First, one little gleam of sunshine rested on the summit of the distant hills, then another fell aslant on the dull, angry looking water of the lake. Presently a tiny morsel of the most luminous azure peeped from beneath the dense leaden expanse above; another few minutes, and the bright beams struggled and poured downwards, and the pale blue sky became dappled by fleecy masses, which sailed onwards and onwards, until they dissolved in the clear ether. As Mildred predicted, the heavens by noon bade fair to be a perfect blaze of splendour—and *she* was more resolved than ever on her expedition.

“Look, look, mamma! I told you we should still bask in another lovely day,” cried she, triumphantly, trying to evade Lord Alresford’s question, pointing to a brilliant ray which fell that instant on the crimson Bohemian glass on the breakfast table.

“The day appears to have taken a most unexpected turn, my love; but still I believe you will find it very damp and disagreeable amongst the ruins: and Fernley is so shaded by trees. But, Mildred, if you are resolved to go, have you requested Lord Alresford’s escort? for you

cannot ride alone, my dear, and I fear your father has other engagements this morning," said Lady Elvaston, determined upon making another effort.

Lord Alresford repeated his question; and this time Sir Gerard Baynton answered:—

"The state of the case is this: Miss Effingham fears to be moped to death in the house, doomed to the society of two such very unenterprising companions as you and I; and therefore, in spite of the elements, insists on joining a party to Fernley Abbey, planned by that very enterprising young lady Miss Tennyson. Now Alresford, you are quite *au fait* in the matter."

"Although I think it very unreasonable of you, Mildred, not to yield to your mother's wishes, and defer the ride until a more propitious day; yet if you have any especial motive for joining Miss Tennyson's party, I shall have great pleasure in accompanying you," said Lord Alresford gently, fixing his earnest eyes on her face.

Mildred blushed, and turned away with an uncomfortable sensation at her heart. Especial motive! Had she not only one little week to decide on the most momentous event of her life! And three days were already expired!

Ah, Mildred—Mildred! Why were you like

those foolish ones who blindly reject the good, the happiness, God invariably places sometime in his children's path, in search of that vague chimera imagination always pictures, though never realizes?

Mildred's principles, however, were too upright, too honourable, to permit her to accept the offer of the Earl's escort, knowing what her secret object in the expedition was: but this, again, involved her in fresh perplexity.

"I fear the morning is rather damp and unpleasant for those who have lately been accustomed to a more genial climate, therefore, I should be so very sorry to force you to this gallop over our bleak hills," said she, hesitatingly. "I dare say Archibald Campbell is going—though are you quite sure, dear papa, you could not spare me this afternoon?"

"Quite impossible, my dear Mildred. I am going to ride to Harlington to transact business with my bailiff," replied Lord Elvaston, abruptly.

Lord Alresford instinctively perceived some mystery lurked behind Mildred's embarrassment.

"And of whom does this party consist?" asked he, coldly.

"Of the Settringham family, Miss Vincent,

Mr. and Mrs. Farnleigh, Mr. Frank Norwood, Colonel Sutherland, Captain Vansittart, Mr. Archibald Campbell, and some others whom I forget," replied Lady Elvaston, promptly: for from the very first day of the Earl's arrival she had wisely resolved that no reserve, no mystery, on her part, should shield her daughter's movements from the observation of the man she so earnestly wished to see her united to; and *his* respect, and *her* influence were thereby increased tenfold.

"Sir Gerard, I suppose you, at least, intend to go," said Miss Effingham, after a pause, rising, with heightened colour, from the breakfast table.

"Yes, certainly, if I am back from Greysdon in time. You remember, I have first to call on Mrs. Campbell with a bulletin of her daughter's health. I will set off immediately. Alresford, you will ride with us?"

"I must beg to be excused. I have letters to write which will not admit of delay," replied the Earl, frigidly.

And Mildred felt that the better understanding and greater cordiality subsisting between them since their evening walk, had vanished.

"Well, Milly, remember I neither sanction nor approve of this expedition. I think it a most

confounded foolish affair: just as if people cannot eat their luncheon quietly and comfortably at home, instead of sitting shivering and shaking under some damp hedge, and giving themselves all manner of pains and aches. Mind, if you will be so silly, I absolutely lay my strict veto that you shall not sit down on the grass," grumbled Lord Elvaston, throwing aside the newspaper. "Don't you think she would be much better at home, Alresford?"

"It is impossible to give an opinion. Mildred must be the best judge of how far her promise to join this party will be considered binding," replied the Earl, calmly.

"Nay, but dear papa, I will be so very, very careful: do not be alarmed. I will wrap myself up so well, and Aglaë, to please you, shall send goloshes, and all kinds of safeguards against wind and rain: only you must not look so grave, and shake your head as though you thought that, instead of enjoying a good bracing canter, I was about to rush into some terrible danger," exclaimed Mildred, pausing behind her father's chair, and throwing her arms round his neck, while her pretty eyes smiled and beamed lovingly on his.

"You little sorceress!" said Lord Elvaston,

fondly patting her cheek. "After all, I believe I shall be obliged to ride with you, and take care of you myself."

"Oh, papa, it will be so very, very kind of you."

"But mind if I go, Mildred, no persuasion on earth shall induce me to touch a particle of her ladyship's nonsensical *dejeuner*: and I must be home again by three."

"Very well, papa. We are to join the party at the ruins. I wrote to Clara yesterday, begging her not to call for me, as it was uncertain when we should be able to set out. Now I must go and talk with Helen," exclaimed Miss Effingham, bounding from the room.

About half an hour afterwards, ready equipped for her excursion, she entered poor Helen's darkened chamber.

"Well, my darling Helen, how do you feel after breakfast? I am come to have just half an hour's chat with you, before we set off for Fernley. I trust Aglaë has been very attentive, and brought you everything you could wish?" said Mildred, sinking into a chair by the bedside, and tossing her riding-hat nonchalantly from her head—much to the detriment of the smooth braids which Aglaë, taking into consideration the humid state of the

atmosphere, had substituted for her usual flowing curls.

"I am much better, and have made a most excellent breakfast. And so you are going to Fernley, dearest," continued she, in a tone of regret. "I heard a most deplorable account of the weather—do, pray, draw the curtain, and let me judge for myself."

Mildred arose, and did as she was requested.

"See, it has turned out quite a bright, lovely morning; not at all too hot to make a ride of seven miles uncomfortable. But Helen, I am so pleased you are better; and so will Sir Gerard Baynton be also, I will answer for it. You have no idea how miserable he seemed about you this morning: and so penitent for having persuaded you to stay out late on the water. Ah, my dear, imprudent, demure Helen, I foresee now, I shall soon have to lecture you on the impropriety of aiming such sudden darts, looking all the time so modest and prettily behaved."

"Really, Mildred, you are too absurd! Sir Gerard is very good-natured, and appears ready to be obliging and kind to everybody," said Helen, blushing a very little.

"Yes, and you will have such a charming mother-in-law to guide you in your duties at the

Chauntry," continued Mildred, laughing. "Lady Emily is everything a woman of rank ought to be, you know; and measured by the Earl's standard, she cannot fall far short of angelic perfection. I generally remark, Helen—and I will say it in spite of your blushes—that when people begin to find out they are mutually amiable, good-natured, and agreeable, they end at last in discovering multitudes of other good and charming qualities."

"Do they!" cried Helen, smiling. "Now, Mildred, I can fairly turn the tables. You remember you told me the other day, how very amiable and agreeable you found the Earl during your *tête-à-tête*: now, mind, I shall look to you to work out your own prophecy. But to be serious, who rides with you this morning to Fernley?"

"Papa, Sir Gerard, and Archibald, constitute my staff, Helen," replied Mildred, turning away her head.

"And not Lord Alresford? Oh, Mildred, think what effect this continued defiance of his wishes must at length produce! Tell me, did you not ask him to ride with you? or how did it happen?"

"The truth is, Helen, when he offered me his escort, my conscience would not allow me promptly to accept of it, knowing I was deliberately seeking an interview with a man whom he disapproves.

Mamma afterwards mentioned that Colonel Sutherland was amongst Sir Richard's guests, and then his lordship coldly and decisively declined to be of the party; and now all is dark between us: dark as ever!" exclaimed Mildred, colouring.

"Mildred," said Helen earnestly, "give up this party. What can it signify to Lord Alresford's betrothed wife to sound Colonel Sutherland's sentiments? If he has been trifling with you, why voluntarily submit to the humiliation of listening to such an avowal? and if his passion is sincere, consider, as you tell me you are firmly resolved on fulfilling your engagement, what additional struggles you doom yourself to encounter, when ——"

"Cease, Helen! I am firmly resolved to ascertain this day, whether I have been the sport, the toy of an unprincipled man, or the object of a sincere, long-suppressed passion. It may be foolish,—it may be rash, but I am determined! and if it proves to be the former, what a lesson,—what a warning will it be to me through life: one more effectual than all the Earl's exhortations!" exclaimed Mildred, vehemently, her lips becoming very pale.

"But should he profess the latter, Mildred, what then?"

"Then, at least, I shall have the consolation of knowing I am not the poor dupe you, Helen, and all the rest of the world imagine," replied Mildred, smiling bitterly.

"I know, while you are in this mood, it is vain to argue the point any longer, Mildred, so I will forbear," said Helen, sorrowfully, sinking back on her pillow.

"If I resist persuasion from your lips, Helen, you must feel how necessary it is to my happiness to have this point cleared up : and, Helen, perhaps 'tis of no less vital consequence to the Earl also ; should the result prove that he can honourably stand clear of his engagement to a girl to whom he even did not think it requisite to announce his intended arrival at her father's house. Who knows but that in his next letter to Wardour Court, in reply to the long one he received this morning, he may announce joyous tidings to the Lady Catherine Neville."

"Excuse me, Mildred, but I know in your heart you do not believe a syllable of what you have just said," replied Helen, calmly. "If Lord Alresford were desirous of offering his hand to Lady Catherine, a single word would release him from his engagements to your family : he could not hesitate, on the score of your affection being compromised, as

your manner, whether assumed or not, must soon satisfy him on this point. But, Mildred, I am also certain, if Lord Alresford does not offer Lady Catherine's letter for your perusal, it will be your own fault."

"Oh, if I could believe so!" murmured Mildred, tears springing to her eyes.

"Only try, Mildred. What did Lord Alresford say the other evening—'only let me respect my wife'—well, force him to do so! Is it not worth a trial? Can you compare Colonel Sutherland to him in intellect, worth, honourable feeling, personal appearance—in fact, anything?"

"All this is true—perfectly—I cannot deny it!" murmured Mildred, covering her face with both her hands.

Miss Effingham did not speak again for some moments.

"If I go astray, Helen, dearest, after your admonitions, I shall, indeed, deserve all the penalties it may entail; but go I must to-day, and meet Sutherland. Nay, do not look so grave, Helen, it shall be the last time I grieve your heart: and if I find he has trifled with me—if the report of his engagement be correct, ——"

"You will then learn to love Lord Alresford, who has been so true in his attachment, as sin-

cerely as your imagination is now smitten by the Colonel's worthless flatteries," interposed Helen.

"Would you wish me so miserable, Helen, as to love without the chance of such a return as would alone satisfy me? But how selfish I have been, talking and exciting you in this manner! and how bad your cough seems. I will ring immediately and prescribe a dose of ipecacuanha. Let me arrange these pillows more comfortably—try this way, darling: there, now your head looks as if it rested more easily. When Aglaë comes, I must say adieu, for I hear the horses are brought round to the hall-door, and dear papa grows always impatient if I am not punctual to a second. Here she comes!"

Aglaë was the bearer of a very urgent message from Lord Elvaston, admonishing his daughter that it was more than a quarter past the time she had fixed to set off; and, after some moments spent in the necessary readjustment of her toilette, Mildred descended to the drawing-room.

Lady Elvaston received in silence her daughter's parting embrace; as, to confess the strict truth, she felt thoroughly indignant. Mildred timidly paused one very brief second as she passed the couch on which Lord Alresford quietly lounged, absorbed in a new publication that morning received from

town; but as his Lordship did not vouchsafe to raise his very handsome eyes from his book, or to manifest any token that he was aware of her presence, she hurriedly quitted the room.

Lady Elvaston arose, and approached the window.

"I cannot express how this strange, wayward infatuation of Mildred's pains and grieves me! It is so inexcusable—so utterly unlike her!" said she, in a voice of deep feeling, as the party cantered by.

Lord Alresford flung aside his book.

"Dear Lady Elvaston, we must have patience. Let us hope her own good sense and rectitude of principle, will at last explain that which now appears so inconsistent and reprehensible," said he, taking her hand.

His words and manner were gentle, and kind.

Lady Elvaston sighed.

CHAPTER IX.

AND a pleasant ride they had through green lanes and over smooth verdant meadows, all reeking with the growing moisture of a soft summer rain; for the road to the ruins of Fernley Abbey lay across flowery fields and bypaths, and sometimes between tall, thick hedges, where the way was so very narrow as scarcely to suffer two horsemen to ride abreast. There is something wondrously exhilarating in this exercise of riding. To a light, happy spirit it affords rich revel indeed to bound freely through the elastic air, inhaling the pure, clear element on a sunshiny day, when the birds sing, and the blue sky stretches over a smiling, joyous landscape; but there is also to the heart depressed by worldly anxiety and care, an excitement in the quick transit, which elates—something which circulates the blood, and revives the lan-

guid energies : something in the murmurs of the fresh, bracing breeze that whispers of hope, and of a time when He who created so fair and mysterious a world for the enjoyment of His fallen creatures, shall at length render all within man as harmonious, shall bind up the wounds of the broken in spirit, and make the waste places of the heart glad with abundant consolation.

And so it was with Mildred Effingham : though, we fear, most of her friends would exclaim, that, at any rate, she did not feel troubled at, but rather gloried in her delinquencies. But if such was their thought, they decidedly wronged her ; for no generous-hearted, high-principled girl, could act directly counter to the advice and known wishes of her dearest friends, however right she might conceive herself to be, without being conscious of a very profound and uncomfortable feeling of sadness, lurking in the hidden recesses of her spirit. And Mildred did feel very miserable as she mounted her horse : and tears glittered in her beautiful eyes, which she had great difficulty in repressing ; but as the buoyant air fanned her cheek, and fluttered amid the folds of her veil, the sensation abated.

On they sped, now on the soft yielding turf, then on the crisp gravel, but neither Miss Effing-

ham nor her father seem inclined to enter into the animated dialogue going forwards between Sir Gerard Baynton and Archibald Campbell. Mildred felt a spell hang heavily on her usual lively spirits —perhaps it might be the remembrance of the kind mother at home, grieving over her wilful perversity. The hedges spread, and displayed all the wild luxuriance of a brilliant June morning. Here and there huge bushes of white and pink dog-roses shot forth vigorous branches, twining insidiously around the stunted stems of the thorn, and drooping showers of pink blossoms and verdant foliage on the mossy bank beneath. The sun, ere they arrived in sight of the ruins, had well nigh dried up every particle of water, and everything looked so fresh and glowing, that even Lord Elvaston was brought to confess, that weather more propitious for the thorough enjoyment of a country ride could not be desired; though he sturdily refused to extend his concession to the unlucky pic-nic, or to pic-nics in general: which he obstinately averred were foolish things in this climate, at all times and in all seasons: and perhaps he was right.

“ Well, Milly, here we are; but I do not at present perceive any of her ladyship’s fantastical preparations,” said Lord Elvaston, as they

wound along the narrow bridle-path down to the ruins.

"Her ladyship knows better than to choose so exposed a site as any you can now see. The *déjeuner*, I suppose, will be spread in the hollow behind the Abbey, sheltered by the clump of elm trees; or in what will please you better, papa, as you are so very romantically inclined this morning, in Queen Mary's chamber," replied Mildred, laughingly.

"Queen Mary's fiddlesticks!" growled Lord Elvaston, in tones half grumpy, half amused.

"And there stands the fair Clara, waving her handkerchief to us," exclaimed Sir Gerard, spurring his horse to Mildred's side, and directing her attention to Miss Tennyson; who stood with several ladies high above, gazing down from a ruined window, surrounded by a large party of gentlemen. "See, Miss Effingham, yonder also sits Lady Tennyson, on a camp stool, with a carriage-mat under her feet, looking as chill and miserable as if she were doing penance! I see she is talking to Colonel Sutherland."

"Mad, mad! she positively must be crazy. An old woman to be betrayed into such absurdity!" said Lord Elvaston, bursting into a fit of laughter,

as Lady Tennyson, with Colonel Sutherland's assistance, unfurled and hoisted a pale, rose-coloured parasol.

At this moment a couple of grooms came forward to lead away the horses, and after a slight demur Lord Elvaston reluctantly dismounted, and giving his arm to his daughter, proceeded to the spot where Lady Tennyson sat. She arose as they approached, but carefully avoided trespassing beyond the borders of the mat.

"How do you do, Lord Elvaston? I am sure I need not put that question to you, Miss Effingham, for I never remember seeing you look better. Sir Gerard Baynton, I am delighted to see you—you will find my son yonder," exclaimed Lady Tennyson, pointing with the delicate ivory handle of her parasol. "He and Frank Norwood are engaged deciding a bet, whether the ditches at the last Boxton steeplechase were as wide as the Abbey moat. Good-morning, Mr. Campbell: it is really very kind of you all to come this damp morning."

"Damp enough; and I fear you find the wind rather keen, also, Lady Tennyson, for you look very pinched and chill," said Lord Elvaston, drily, bowing coldly to Colonel Sutherland.

“Do I? Now, really, if I could just trouble you, Mr. Archibald Campbell, to step to the carriage, and fetch my large sable pelisse. Daughters in these days, Lord Elvaston, are not sufficiently thoughtful for their parents’ comfort; and there is Clara yonder, who never dreams it possible I can be the worse for all this humid vapour. Miss Effingham!”—but Mildred, a few steps from her irritable Ladyship, was talking to the Colonel, and did not at first hear. “Colonel Sutherland,” continued Lady Tennyson, peevishly, “in olden days, you positively would have been indicted for sorcery, as you always contrive to attract and monopolize a young lady’s undivided attention. I was going to inquire, Miss Effingham, after the health of the Earl of Alresford.”

“Lord Alresford is perfectly well, I believe, Lady Tennyson,” replied Mildred, with heightened colour.

“His Lordship’s time must be very precious now. I know, before my darling Jemima’s marriage, Mr. Macpherson was wholly occupied with his correspondence, and in penning lengthy effusions to his man of business. All may be *couleur de rose* during the courtship, to the young bride elect, you know, my dear Lord Elvaston, as she is sup-

posed to be ignorant of these various little negotiations ; but to us parents, all the *ennui* of settlements, pin-money, &c., mar, in no small degree, the pleasing excitement of a wedding," said Lady Tennyson, complacently.

Mildred coloured, and Colonel Sutherland, and the gentlemen around could not repress a smile ; for, despite Lady Tennyson's boasting, it was notorious that her darling Jemima's husband, Mr. Macpherson, depended for his yearly income on the favourable balance in his betting-books.

"How does your sister like her horse, Campbell?" asked Colonel Sutherland, to change the conversation.

"Helen appears highly delighted, and manages beautifully : she would have been here to-day but for a bad cold, which rendered it impossible for her to ride this morning."

"For which she may thank that foolish fellow," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, pointing to Sir Gerard, "who insisted on rowing her on the lake until near midnight."

"Indeed!" rejoined Lady Tennyson, quickly ; "I did not know you were so enthusiastic, Sir Gerard. We have a splendid sheet of water at Settringham, which I hope, as you are fond of

rowing, may be an inducement to you to give us the pleasure of your company for a few days."

"You do me great honour, Lady Tennyson. But when my visit to the Priory is ended, it is very uncertain where destiny may transport me," replied Sir Gerard.

"I trust then your stay at the Priory may be much prolonged, for we cannot spare you, Sir Gerard, when all our beaux and belles are flying from the neighbourhood. Do you know, Colonel Sutherland, I even heard the other day that the ——— Dragoons were ordered from Stanmore to some outlandish place in the Highlands. I suppose it was but a report after all?"

"Our case, Lady Tennyson, is not quite so lamentable, though provoking enough," rejoined Colonel Sutherland. "We are under marching orders for Edinburgh; but you may fancy how keen must be our regret to quit a place where we have met with so much kindness and hospitality. I can honestly vouch some of the happiest hours of my life have been spent in M——shire," continued he, lowering his voice, until to Mildred's ear was it alone audible.

"Although the regiment may be ordered away, I trust Colonel Sutherland has made no resolve to reject the invitations of his old friends, and that

we shall still frequently welcome him in this neighbourhood, said Lady Tennyson, smiling blandly. "Oh! I am charmed this foolish wager is decided, for I see Sir Richard coming towards us," continued her ladyship, half rising, as her son and his friend appeared.

"But then the fairest flower will no more be seen! Is it not wise, Miss Effingham, to avoid places, and reminiscences which can but recall too vividly a time of exquisite happiness, vanished for ever?" murmured Colonel Sutherland, in Mildred's ear.

Can this be the language of a man plighted to another? thought Mildred.

"It depends whether those reminiscences are such as conscience approves," replied she, nevertheless, promptly.

"Well, Dick, who has won? Indeed, you must both have been deep in argument not to perceive Miss Effingham's presence," exclaimed Lady Tennyson, as the young men approached.

"I most humbly apologize, Miss Effingham," said Sir Richard, hastening forwards; "but, you see, those confounded elder bushes completely concealed this spot. How is Lady Elvaston, and your friend Miss Campbell?"

"Mamma is well; but I cannot give so good an account of Helen, who is laid up with a bad cold."

"I am sorry to hear it. Frank, if your spine has recovered its flexibility since that terrible shock at the Boxton steeple-chase, and you can do honour to my introduction by an elegant bow, I will beg permission to present you to Miss Effingham. Miss Effingham, may I introduce my friend, Frank Norwood, of Chartleigh?"

Mr. Frank Norwood inclined so profoundly, as to set at rest all doubt any one present might feel as to the perfect elasticity of his vertebræ.

"But I am dying to know how you have decided the bet, Dick," interposed Lady Tennyson.

"Well, mother, as it seemed impossible to come to any decision, we resolved to despatch Bob Higgins to Settringham to fetch the horses; so Spankaway and Black Bess may have at it presently. I am so glad you are here, Miss Effingham; it will be a piece of rare sport. But the best of it is, mother, Frank swears his groom is lighter than Bob; who I proposed should be our jockey."

"I am surprised at Mr. Norwood. I should say Bob was several stone the lighter," replied Lady Tennyson, decisively, delighted her darling son had at last found something sufficiently novel to kindle his interest.

"Well, Lady Tennyson, while these young

gentlemen discuss their jockeys and bets, I propose that you and I take a gentle stroll through the ruins; unless, indeed, as I strongly recommend, you take up a position amongst the cushions of your carriage, as the most comfortable you can command here," said Lord Elvaston.

"To tell you the truth, I think I have never fully recovered that sad jumble between Settringham and Stanmore in Dick's phaeton; so I think I will take your advice, my dear Lord, if you will be good enough to give me your arm. See! here comes Clara," and Lady Tennyson arose languidly, and stepped from the mat as if she were about to place her toe on a red-hot ploughshare.

"My dear Mildred, I am so enchanted to see you! I was quite sure you might be relied upon, though mamma prophesied you would not come," cried Miss Tennyson, bounding forwards, followed by two or three ladies dressed à l'amazone. "After all, it was such a very slight shower, and one might be ever poking in the house if such *contretemps* were suffered to break up one's projects. Well, Sir Gerard, you have never been over to Settringham to see my pointers; but I suppose men are alike, and all their promises resemble cobwebs, which the first breath of wind

dissipates. *La ! mamma,*" continued Miss Tennyson,* as her eye rested on her mother's muffled figure, "how can you wrap yourself up in that fur pelisse this broiling day ! You look exactly like the old Nabob of Dornton — I beg your pardon, my dear Caroline—when he came home from Calcutta, crawling like a huge beetle under all his cloaks and wrappers."

"Your mother, like a sensible person, is going to sit quietly in her carriage until you are wearied of your rambles in the wet woods. But I should like to know, Miss Clara, now you have taken the trouble of bringing us all together, what the deuce it is you intend us to do ?" said Lord Elvaston, quaintly.

"Do ! My dear Lord Elvaston, you are always so droll. I hope—after you have enjoyed this beautiful fresh air, and climbed the hill yonder, which is really worth your while to do, to look at the windings of the swollen river in the valley—you will ride back with us to Settringham ; as I really could not gainsay the fact, that it was too damp and wet a day to dream of a rustic entertainment among the ruins."

"I am infinitely obliged to you, my dear Clara, for being convinced of this fact ; but, unfortunately, it will be impossible for Mildred and my-

self to return home with you, as I have an engagement at three o'clock," replied Lord Elvaston.

"Oh! I am so grieved. But, Mildred," continued she, dragging Miss Effingham a few paces from the group, "why did you not bring Lord Alresford?"

"When I left home, he proposed to be busily engaged during the whole morning with letter-writing," replied Mildred, rather embarrassed.

"How provoking! You must excuse me, Mildred, but I protest I should be ready to quarrel *à la mort* with any man who preferred occupying himself with his correspondence, rather than obey my sovereign will and pleasure. Mamma, however, declares these philosophical lovers generally make attentive husbands; and I am sure I cannot help thinking there is truth in what she says, for never was there a more devoted lover than Mr. Macpherson, and now poor dear Jemi only catches a glimpse of him once or so in a couple of days."

And here, in the pursuit of her silly scheme, she had subjected Lord Alresford to the impertinent comments of such a girl as Clara Tennyson! Mildred felt her cheek tingle.

"I assure you it was my fault, and my own fault alone, Lord Alresford did not accompany me here this morning," replied she, coldly.

"Oh, I am sure of it: I do not doubt it!" rejoined Miss Tennyson, quickly; for there was that now in Miss Effingham's tone—a species of distant coldness and slight hauteur—which invariably reminded her young friends, save the privileged Helen Campbell, when Lord Elvaston's heiress conceived they were trenching on the sacred ground of conventional *bienséance* in the freedom of their remarks. "But, my dear Mildred, if you have no objection, let us walk up the hill, and take a stroll round that beautiful meadow. We shall be back by the time mamma is comfortably packed in the carriage; then we will have a biscuit and a glass of wine—which necessities, I assure you, Mr. Frank Norwood took famous good care to remind me of—and afterwards ride back to Settringham. I trust to you to persuade Lord Elvaston."

"What is that you say about me, Miss Tennyson?" said Mr. Norwood, suddenly turning, and bending his good-natured eyes on her face.

"Only that Mr. Frank Norwood is monstrously proficient in the art of taking care of himself," rejoined Clara, with a laugh.

"And a deuced good quality too! There is nothing like a short campaign on the turf for making men's wits keen as a razor, is there,

Frank?" said Sir Richard, with a knowing wink.

"Hallo! Stop, Dick! Never drag up old scores. He must be a wretched driveller, indeed, who does not pluck up his mettle, and see a little farther than most men, after a plunge into New-market—ahem, what shall I call it?"

"Knavery! you mean, Mr. Norwood. Make a clean breast of it at once!" exclaimed Miss Tennyson, in a loud voice.

"My dear Clara, you do shock me so terribly with your dreadful strong expressions," cried Lady Tennyson, affectedly raising her handkerchief to her nose.

"Bravo, Clara!" exclaimed Lord Elvaston.

"Why, there is a good deal of that, and I won't attempt to deny it, though more's the pity," resumed Mr. Norwood, nowise abashed; "but I was going to observe, Miss Tennyson, a man may throw all care for himself behind his back when he enters Settringham. By Jove! he lacks not a single element to make life delightful!" continued he, energetically.

Miss Tennyson tossed her head, with a little abrupt laugh; but her eye still rested complacently on the good-humoured visage of Mr. Frank Norwood,—for, be it known to the reader, she

was not blind to the advantage, in a worldly point of view, of attracting the admiration of a man, who, unlike her brother-in-law Macpherson, really possessed the *de quoi* for indulging in the luxury of horses and grooms, at discretion; and who made the neighbouring county ring with the rollicking conviviality of Chartleigh House.

"Mr. Frank Norwood is evidently preparing a fresh burst of pathetics; 'tis a pity his eloquence should meet any other ear than Miss Tennyson's," said Colonel Sutherland, in a supercilious whisper to Mildred: "let us stroll about. I trust Miss Effingham will do me the honour of accepting my arm—perhaps for the last time."

Mildred silently placed her hand on the Colonel's arm.

"Come, what is the use of our dawdling here?" exclaimed Miss Tennyson. "We are going to walk to the spinney yonder; so, gentlemen, I shall call out, like King Stephen, before the battle of Crecy, 'let him who loves me, follow!' Oh, I see, Colonel, you have already secured a companion. Sir Gerard, I choose you for my cavalier; so let us set off without delay, I entreat. Dick, mind and superintend the spreading, or rather unpacking, of our refreshment, by the time we return."

"Willingly; if I have leisure before Black Bess's arrival," replied Sir Richard, doggedly.

"What a barbarian you are to be sure, Dick! Well, mamma, you will desire Hurst to look after it,—or, perhaps, Lord Elvaston will be so very kind as to do so," replied Miss Tennyson, walking away with Sir Gerard.

"I say, Miss Tennyson, what am I to do whilst you are gone?" asked Mr. Frank Norwood, looking rather blank.

"Oh, while Dick is occupied with Black Bess, you stay, by all means, and jockey Spankaway,—or, perhaps, you may be useful as a cavalier for Carry:—no, you will not be wanted; she is walking yonder, with Captain Vansittart."

"Remember, Mildred, in three-quarters of an hour we must be on our road homewards," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, seriously uneasy at seeing his darling Mildred walk away, arm-in-arm, with the redoubtable Colonel.

"Your Lordship may depend upon our punctuality; so go on—go on, good people!" cried Miss Tennyson, starting off at a brisk pace.

"What a thousand pities it is that Miss Tennyson, with all her many good qualities, should have contracted so unfeminine a deportment," said Colonel Sutherland, as they slowly ascended the

hill. "When you leave the county, Miss Effingham, the world, for a season, will drown its regret by turning its attention to the affairs of Settringham; for I foresee a marriage will soon connect the Tennysons with the owner of Chartleigh."

"Indeed! I fancied the acquaintance with Mr. Norwood was a very recent affair."

"Very recent. Three months ago, when Sir Richard and Mr. Frank Norwood met at our mess, they were strangers; but you know, Miss Effingham, a web is easily woven to entangle the heart: would that, when once captured, its fetters were stronger—more indissoluble!"

"When such is not the case, generally speaking, some radical and fatal error intervenes, rest assured. Some *penchant* which ought not to have been indulged ——"

"Affection is not always to be moulded at will, Miss Effingham. A bright vision of beauty and goodness floats upon us, and 'tis vain to resist. Against every sentiment of prudence, every suggestion of reason, the heart yields to the fascination, and then there follows bitter remorse; for in errors of the heart there is no room for repentance: even the gentlest natures become stern and implacable. Do you know of any possible extenuating circumstances, Miss Effingham?"

Mildred pondered. Her cheek was flushed, but her tone and manner were firm and collected.

"It depends whether we have voluntarily placed ourselves in the position from which this bright vision, to use your own words, moves us to recoil: whether we have freely sought our fate, or whether it has been imposed upon us; whether, in short, in the pursuit of our own selfish passions we have recklessly trifled with the peace, or taken advantage of the peculiar situation of another—knowing at the same time that our own position, and every tie of honour, were our circumstances fully exposed, would forbid such a project, even had no obstacle existed on theirs," replied Mildred firmly, raising her eyes to his face.

"But do you make no allowance for the severity of the temptation?" said Colonel Sutherland, colouring.

"Remember the old Spanish adage says, with as much truth as wisdom, '*gustos y disgustos son no mas que imaginacion!*'" rejoined Mildred, with a smile.

"But you did not find it so in your experience, Miss Effingham," replied he reproachfully. "Lord Alresford ——"

"Stay!" interrupted Mildred, impetuously, colouring deeply—for she longed to atone, how-

ever imperfectly, for the slighting manner and language into which she had been betrayed at the unfortunate dinner party—on the contrary, my case strongly illustrates the proverb. It was imagination alone which led me into the error of speaking hastily and unguardedly of a man who now, short as the time appears, possesses my esteem and highest admiration.”

“I was sure it must be so in time: yet, oh, Miss Effingham, you have only declared your esteem and admiration are Lord Alresford’s; but your love ——”

Mildred trembled: her breath came quick and fast.

“Is still, thank God, in my own gift, and at the command of my reason!” answered she, after a brief pause, in unfaltering tones. “But have you, indeed, Colonel Sutherland, the right to ask me this question? Can it be true that, knowing my early betrothal to Lord Alresford, you have insidiously tried to win his place in my regard; when, as I have been told, by your own spontaneous act you pledged your faith, scarcely eighteen months ago, to Miss Conway?”

“That I love you deeply, fervently, to the destruction of my future peace, and that I now pay the penalty of my folly by knowing you

the bride of another, let this suffice you, Miss Effingham. Press me no more: at least leave me the feeble consolation of your esteem," replied Colonel Sutherland, in a voice of deep agitation.

Mildred, however, the usually gentle and tender-hearted Mildred resolutely closed her ears to this appeal: a sudden chill seemed to have blighted, and deadened her sympathy.

"As you value my good opinion, Colonel Sutherland, answer me truly and sincerely. Let not a shadow of doubt linger on our mutual positions. Are you engaged to marry Miss Conway?" demanded she, again, in cold, constrained tones.

"Since you positively demand an answer, Miss Effingham, and ask it, moreover, in the name of what I prize most in the world—your esteem—I will openly confess such an engagement does subsist," rejoined Colonel Sutherland, in low, hesitating tones. "Since I have known you, this fatal chain weighs me to the ground. I have been upon the point of avowing everything a thousand times; but I had not courage to endure banishment from your presence. I implore you, speak, Miss Effingham: say I have not quite forfeited everything, save your contempt!" continued he, earnestly.

A burning, choking sensation arose in Mildred's throat; the blood rushed to her face, her neck, her hands, and then receded again, leaving all pale as alabaster, even to her lips. She felt crushed under the humiliation. It was, then, true that she had been made the sport, the *passetemps* of a heartless, selfish deceiver. For this man, such as he was, she had inflicted trouble and anxiety, pang after pang, on all she loved—on her gentle mother, her indulgent father—on Helen, and had well nigh, if not totally, alienated her betrothed husband. Never had she been so sensible of the exceeding bitterness of deviating, however slightly, from the strict path of rectitude. She felt self-convicted; and now mourned, as deeply even as Helen could desire, that absence of candour and confidence towards him, whose powerful mind could have safely steered her amid the perils of her own unsettled, wandering fancy.

"Miss Effingham, is my offence beyond forgiveness? Will you not bestow a word, not even a glance, on one who has so long lived on your smile?" said Colonel Sutherland, taking her hand.

She hastily snatched it from him.

"Is it possible any human being could act so basely? Oh, Colonel Sutherland, the confession I have this day heard from your lips is, indeed, my

sorest punishment for having swerved, even in the mere fact of admitting your attentions, from the faith it was my duty to preserve towards him to whom my parents had given me. Why have you made me the degraded object of receiving attentions stolen from another? Why was I unwittingly made the destroyer of Miss Conway's peace? How dare you have acted thus towards me?" exclaimed she, passionately.

"You are harsh, Miss Effingham. May I not, on the other hand, inquire of you, had I been free, whether you could finally have realized the hopes *your* conduct led *me* to cherish? Were your manners and deportment, when first we met, such as to induce me to credit the prevailing report of your engagement? Dazzled by the brightness of your beauty, I was led on step by step—deluded by the thought, that if the rumour were true, my attention could not endanger your happiness, over-confident, likewise, in the strength of my own attachment to Lord Normanton's sister—until at length the chain became too strong, and I ceased to wrestle. You never alluded to your engagement, and I lulled myself in the vain hope that after all it might not be so."

"Then the affianced husband of Miss Conway, you thought it no crime to ensnare and destroy

the peace of another for your own selfish gratification. I thank you, Colonel Sutherland, for what you had in reserve for me," exclaimed Mildred, turning indignantly round.

"No, by Heaven! you wrong me, Miss Effingham. To obtain your favour, I would only too joyfully resign everything—everybody!" replied Colonel Sutherland, in a low, agitated whisper.

Could Colonel Sutherland have seen the contempt that at this moment flashed from eyes which in days of yore he had been wont to declare soft and tender as houris', it would have haunted him for many a long day afterwards.

"Poor Miss Conway!" exclaimed she, almost sarcastically.

"Nay: Miss Conway's case is less worthy of commiseration than mine, since you deign to pity her. But will you deprive me of every consolation? Say, I implore you, Mildred, had it been with me as it ought before I presumed to raise my eyes to you, would you now have bidden me hope?"

How did Mildred's heart thrill at these words! Though indignation now seemed to master every other feeling, the clear earnest tones of that voice had once fallen pleasantly on her ear. She had dreamed, too, of the love which now stood re-

vealed, as the utmost felicity which could befall her; yet, in the brief space of half an hour, how changed her feelings! The dazzling vision of imagination had fled; but its shadow still lingered, and fostered amid its deepening gloom, a sickly sense of lonely desolation. How could she reply to his question? She felt it her bounden duty towards Miss Conway, no less than what the claims of Lord Alresford imperatively demanded, not to suffer the presumptuous Colonel to be conscious of the powerful sway he once wielded over her. She therefore promptly replied,—

“No, Colonel Sutherland, I could not bid you hope. Ere I pronounced words of such import, your character must have been better known to me. Perfect confidence and esteem, as I said before, must ever be the foundation of true affection; and, believe me, wherever this is wanted, even in the minutest degree, all will end in disappointment and mutual distrust. I could worship integrity, pure, loyal, and unshaken!”

Colonel Sutherland bit his lip.

“The end of my short delirium of love is, then, that you thoroughly despise me. ’Tis hard to bear, Miss Effingham!” said he at length, with an effort.

“Despise you! Oh! do not think so,” replied

Mildred, quickly and earnestly, for she knew the galling torment of supposing such a feeling in the breast of one whose regard we value. She paused for a few moments. The Colonel continued walking silently by her side. "Would you really wish to regain my good opinion—my gratitude, Colonel Sutherland?" at length asked she, very gently.

"Nay; do not ask me this, Miss Effingham. I would obey you even at the risk of my life. I would forfeit everything to stand as I did in your favour one little month ago," replied he, with emotion.

"Then relieve my conscience of the anxiety I must unknowingly have inflicted on Miss Conway, by going directly—nay, this very evening—to Moreton. I beseech you, Colonel Sutherland, refuse me not the consolation of thinking I have repaired, as far as possible, the injury committed. Plead urgently, and if she indeed loves you, she will forgive. Will you grant my prayer?" said Mildred, tears rising in her eyes.

"If she loves me she will forgive, say you! Ah! I once dreamed of urging this plea to another," replied Colonel Sutherland, hastily.

Mildred turned away.

"Miss Effingham, cost me what it will, I will try to obey you."

A sad smile curled Mildred's lip. She had erred, and was beginning to feel that repentance was harder—bitterer—than the resolute avoidance, in the first instance, of temptation. Oh! that more would heed this, and be warned betimes!

"Then we are reconciled. Colonel Sutherland, I pray you, let us never, never revert to what has now passed between us. As for the share I have had in fostering your error—for I feel while censuring you I am far from guiltless myself—I earnestly entreat your pardon. May I think you bear me no resentment for what has been so culpable in my deportment?" said she, in subdued tones, raising her soft eyes to his.

"Resentment! Do you ask whether I regret you smiled upon me? and that for a brief space I fancied myself beloved? No, Miss Effingham, in the hard sentence you have pronounced I acknowledge your rectitude; and that Mildred Effingham, to have acted consistently with herself, could not have decided otherwise. My folly has brought its just reward, in an attachment which will but expire with myself."

Mildred could not reply;—she felt a *serrement de cœur* which bereft her of the power of speech, and silently they wended their way to the foot of the hill, where already some of the party had arrived.

“Bless me, Mildred, how dreadfully white and fatigued you look! I trust you have not realized Lord Elvaston’s forebodings, and actually got wet in the feet!” exclaimed Clara Tennyson, darting forwards as Miss Effingham approached; “you should have walked more in the centre of the meadow, instead of groping along under the shade of the plantations, where we observed, Colonel Sutherland, you in a most unsoldier-like fashion led Miss Effingham. You will never do for a guide, I can tell you, if you are thus careless of the health and convenience of your companion. But come along, my dear Mildred, and drink a glass of sherry, which I hope will kindle again your roses. You look so pale and fagged, Mildred! I am grieved you were unfortunately compelled to go draggling alone with that stupid Colonel,” said Clara, as she seized her friend’s arm, and walked away towards the carriage in which Lady Tennyson sat enthroned.—“After all, he is but what my precious brother would call a slow-coach. Do hark at those shouting men! One would imagine them a pack of lunatics bawling in Bedlam!” continued Clara, as the kicking and plunging of horses echoed round, and the air rang with confused shouts.

To please Lady Tennyson the carriage had been

removed, so as to furnish her with a full view of the sport of her son and his delectable friend, and all the gentlemen were gathered around it. Lord Elvaston, however, the moment his eye fell on Mildred's wan countenance, quietly ordered the horses round, whilst she took the refreshment thrust into her hands by the determined Clara.

"Come, Milly, I am sorry to hurry you away, but you remember I have an appointment this afternoon at Harlington. Baynton, pray do not imagine yourself bound to accompany us home. You will, I dare say, find your way back there some time before half-past seven," said Lord Elvaston, approaching very resolutely to pay his farewell compliments to Lady Tennyson.

"Thank you, I am quite ready now," quickly replied Sir Gerard. "Miss Tennyson, I am sorry I cannot stay to see the finale of Spankaway and Black Bess's feats, but I promised to ride with Lord Elvaston to Harlington. You must know now I intend to settle permanently at the Chauntry, I am making turnips and short-horns my serious study; it would, therefore, be a pity to lose such an opportunity—so farewell, with many thanks for a most delightful walk."

"I suppose we shall soon see you again?" said Miss Tennyson, shaking hands.

“Very soon, I trust.”

Colonel Sutherland meanwhile approached, and aided Mildred to mount her horse. His hand lingered on hers as he placed the reins in her grasp.

“May you be happy, Miss Effingham,—happier than I! I will obey your commands, and set out for Moreton,” whispered he hurriedly.

Mildred hastily drew down her veil—and they parted.

Thus vanished Mildred Effingham’s fairy dream, and stern reality stood before her, armed with all its terrors—for stern was it to her, though, doubtless, her lot was incomparably more enviable without, than with the fascinating Colonel; but Mildred was the child of rank, wealth, and luxury, and what she sighed for was *affection*. Her spirit longed for that thing, rare, precious, and beyond price—a faithful devoted heart—on which to stay her own; and can it excite wonder if a chill sensation crept over her mind when imagination pictured the fastidious, *exigeant* individual to whom her faith was pledged, and who she had that very morning so rashly braved? When Mildred arrived at her home she scarcely knew how the time had passed since she quitted the enclosure of the Abbey of Fernley, and waved her parting adieux to the noisy assemblage there. Her cheek was hot and flushed, and

there was a sharp, restless glitter in her eye which did not escape Lord Elvaston's notice,—as he lifted her from the horse, and felt the burning heat of the little hand in his grasp.

“Why, Milly, my child, what's the matter? your hand feels quite feverish! I hope you have not caught cold during this foolish expedition. Come with me and I will speak to your mother;” but Mildred shook her head, and bounded away up stairs.

“I dare say Miss Effingham is fatigued with her ride,” suggested Sir Gerard.

“Fatigued! nothing of the kind, my dear Baynton. She has ridden with me for hours ere to-day, and never complained of fatigue. That absurd Clara Tennyson, with all her confounded folly and megrims, ought positively to be voted a nuisance in the county! By Jove! she and her mother make a precious pair!” grumbled Lord Elvaston, as he slowly remounted his horse, and, accompanied by Sir Gerard, took the road to Harlington.

CHAPTER X.

MILDRED proceeded straight to her dressing-room, and hastily closing the door, threw aside her hat and gloves, and sank into a chair—to think. She sat with one hand supporting her throbbing temples; and, though one design alone stood boldly prominent amid the confusion of ideas which thronged her mind, yet the prop on which she had rested for so many days past had been hurled from her with a shock so sudden, that she felt it impossible at first to realize the fact. Vainly she clasped her fingers across her aching brow, to shut out the bewildering sensation of utter loneliness; to stay the sounds of the laughter, the obstreperous merriment which still rang in her ears. The more she strove to give coherence to her ideas, the heavier did the sense of desolation press home. She felt degraded in proportion as her reliance on Colonel Sutherland's truth and

honour had been steadfast. She thought then of Lord Alresford, and what his stern contempt for her thoughtless levity must be; and bitterly, intensely did she now deplore the folly which reared this barrier between them! Mildred had, however, formed her purpose; but, though strong in her resolve, her heart trembled at its decision,—long she struggled for firmness, but at length her spirit yielded, and, overpowered with conflicting emotions, her head sank on the pillow, and she wept bitter tears of anguish.

Presently the pendule on the chimney-piece struck. It wanted a quarter to four. She hastily arose, and dashing the tears from her eyes, rang the bell. In a few minutes Aglaë obeyed the summons. She started, and gazed on Mildred for a second with surprise and alarm; but instantly divining some uncommon event had occurred to raise this tumult of agitation, she forebore to utter a syllable, but quietly advancing to the toilette, took up a bottle and sprinkled some drops of eau de Cologne on the pale brow of her young mistress. She then hastily unfastened the tight habit and held a glass of water to poor Mildred's trembling lips. In a short time her sobs ceased, and she stood up.

“Thank you, my kind, attentive Aglaë. I feel

much better now. I believe I am dreadfully nervous, and over-fatigued with my long ride. Pray make haste, for I have a great deal to do before the dressing-bell rings, and it is now four."

"But surely mademoiselle will take rest before dinner. Oh, pray do."

"No, no. Make haste!" and Mildred hastily seated herself at her toilette.

Aglæe refrained from further entreaty or comment, and immediately applied herself to smooth her mistress's disordered hair. With restless eagerness Mildred watched the operation; never before had she felt so impatient and excitable, and her fingers trembled as she hastily took one thing, and then another from the table, as the idea occurred that it might be wanted, or that Aglaë's eye was in search of it.

"Where is Miss Campbell?" asked she hastily, when at length she stood arrayed as she had been at the breakfast-table that morning.

"Mademoiselle is in de boudoir on de sofa. I tink she appear much bettare."

"And mamma."

"Milédi is sitting with Miss Campbell—and Milor——"

Mildred turned away, and took up her watch and chain from the toilette. Her colour wavered.

"Pardon, mademoiselle, permettez que je vous passe cela autour du cou. Milor, as I was saying, cross de hall, and enter de library as I come up into your room, about tree quarter of an hour ago, just before you return. C'est une chose merveilleuse, mademoiselle, de vary great deal de English gentleman write!"

"Well, Aglaë, that will do now. Pray, tell mamma and dear Helen that I will come to them very soon, but just now I wish not to be disturbed, as I have something very important to do; and, Aglaë, do not mention to mamma, lest it should alarm her, that I did not feel quite well after my ride."

"Very well, mademoiselle. Certes, c'est ce chien de climat qui donne des attaques de nerfs!" murmured Aglaë, as she closed the door, and went to perform her errand in her best and most engaging manner: for Aglaë was a model of discretion, and, unlike her countrywomen generally, possessed complete mastery over her tongue; and she, moreover, would sooner forfeit her right hand than betray any fact she suspected her beloved young mistress would rather have concealed.

Aglaë's steps had no sooner ceased to echo along the corridor, than Mildred turned, and hastily seizing the half-filled goblet of water,

which still stood on the table, swallowed its contents at a draught, and without once venturing to put the smallest question to her heart, opened the door, and descended with the speed of lightning. With hurried step she sped along the vestibule, laid her hand resolutely on the lock of the library-door, and entered.

It was a lofty room, lighted by three large Gothic windows. Near one of these Lord Alresford was seated writing. A couch was drawn into the deep recess of the window, upon which lay a quantity of books, one open, with its face turned on the leather cushion, as if some one had just risen from its perusal. Lord Alresford immediately laid down his pen, and looked up in surprise as Mildred, with firm, unshaken step, advanced and stood before him. Her cheek was very white, and her lips firmly compressed.

"I have sought your Lordship to announce that I am ready and willing to confirm our engagement," said she, in a low immoveable voice, bending her eyes to the ground.

Lord Alresford did not speak for some seconds. Mildred felt his gaze was riveted upon her, and the colour rushed to her face and neck.

"Really, Miss Effingham, your conduct forms a most extraordinary and unexpected *dénouement*

to the scene of this morning. Excuse me, if I distinctly entreat you to understand, that I will not submit to be trifled with; and as, from your manner, you could scarcely have meditated your present step then, believe me, it will redound to our mutual advantage if you take longer time for consideration," replied he at length, severely.

Mildred's heart palpitated. Had she then sunk so low in his esteem, that even the strength and reality of her good resolution was doubted?

"I have reflected; my decision would be as it is now," rejoined she, proudly.

"If so, you of course consider yourself amenable to any explanations I think proper to demand; and thus empowered, Miss Effingham, I ask you, in the first place, whether your intimacy with Colonel Sutherland has ceased totally and for ever?"

Mildred covered her face with her hands, while every nerve shook with agitation. Presently she raised her head, and her proud lip quivered painfully as she encountered the searching gaze bent upon her.

"I have erred, and deserve this humiliation," murmured she. "Colonel Sutherland is engaged to marry Miss Conway!" exclaimed she, at length, with a violent effort, instantly burying again her face in her hands.

"Miss Effingham! Mildred! Nay, I beseech you, be calm!" exclaimed Lord Alresford, hastily, shocked at her excessive emotion, and penetrated with admiration at her noble, frank avowal of a fact so very mortifying to her vanity and self-love. "I fain trust it is now superfluous for me to point out the magnitude of your error, or the injury you have been the means of inflicting on Miss Conway; to say nothing, Mildred, of the reproaches I might so justly pour upon you for your faithless disregard of vows solemnly pledged to me! Would that you had sooner yielded to the conviction, that I was not the only person injured by—forgive me, if I so designate it—your heartless coquetry!" added the Earl quickly, in the same tones.

"Then you were aware of Colonel Sutherland's engagement?" said Mildred, faintly.

"Yes; I learned it from Lady Normanton herself——"

"And yet you never warned me of the precipice on which I stood," cried she, passionately.

"Pardon me, Miss Effingham, it was not for me, a party so closely interested, to inform you of a fact, which, if you possessed a particle of womanly feeling and generosity, must have sufficed to drive from you, in scorn and abhorrence, a man

capable of such deception ; nevertheless, I knew you had been told. I knew this very circumstance had been pleaded to you by Lady Elvaston, and yet you refused to believe ! Did you regard my expostulations ? Did you before heed my entreaties when I urged you, on the faith you owed me, to avoid Colonel Sutherland's society. Conceive my feelings of indignation, when, on my return hither, I found the county ringing with scandal on the subject of your indiscreet familiarity with such a man as Colonel Sutherland ! No, Mildred ; even your mother could not offer a word of palliation for her daughter."

"It was an infatuation ! Lord Alresford, I will take all your reproaches meekly, for I feel I deserve them. Yet could you know how I have suffered, perhaps even these might be spared me !" exclaimed Mildred, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"Mildred, do you indeed sincerely desire our reconciliation ?" said the Earl, bending upon her a searching look.

"Should I be here, my lord ? Think you, I would else listen to your reproaches ?" exclaimed she, her eyes flashing through her tears. "But I have small hope of obtaining your forgiveness."

"If you would truly obtain it, Mildred, tell me

all your heart. If our engagement is to be ratified anew, there must be no concealments between us; for it would, indeed, be mockery to say to you now, I forgive that, which in my wife I would not tolerate a moment. I must know more of this affair with Colonel Sutherland. Are you willing to grant me this explanation?" asked the Earl, gravely.

Mildred paused. She raised her eyes timidly to Lord Alresford's face; he was standing by her side, and she saw that in its expression which showed her he would admit no longer of trifling. There was an indescribable something which cast its spell over her spirit whenever she conversed with him. Perhaps the charm lay in the simple truthful decision of his tone and manner. She felt the warm blood tingle in her cheek; yet she hastened to reply: for, with all her faults, hers was not one of those disingenuous natures who dare offend, and yet when fully convicted of injustice, shrink from healing the wound occasioned by its rash impetuosity.

"I will give you this explanation, or any other you choose to ask," replied she, in a low, unsteady voice.

"Then answer me, Mildred. How far, on my

arrival here, were you compromised with Colonel Sutherland? Were his advances limited only to paying you marked attention? or had he presumed to breathe the word *Love* into the ear of my betrothed wife?—ah, Mildred, that I should add also, perhaps with her assent!”

Mildred's brow crimsoned. Never, perhaps, before had she experienced a moment so exquisitely painful.

“Colonel Sutherland never spoke to me on that—that subject——” and she paused.

“Never?”

“Until this morning; and then he owned the fact of his engagement. But the error has been all on my side. Blame me alone, my lord. I acknowledge myself guilty! Yes,” continued she passionately, “I will not seek to palliate it. My conduct when first we met, was not such, I avow to my shame, as to induce him to believe I was no longer free! What more do you require to know?”

“Much—everything, Mildred! Is it to this fact,—this unexpected revelation of Colonel Sutherland's dishonourable trifling that I am indebted for your sudden wish for reconciliation?” asked the Earl, coldly.

“Do you deem me so dishonourable? No,

Lord Alresford, even when writhing under the severe though merited rebuke contained in your letter after that unfortunate evening, I still, as Miss Campbell will bear me witness, firmly resolved to fulfil my engagement to you ! ” rejoined Mildred, vehemently.

“ You astonish me ! Indeed, I should have found it difficult to divine such an intent ; and your reception likewise, Mildred, of the man whom you intended to make your husband, was certainly unique of its kind ! ” replied the Earl, in accents slightly ironical.

“ Lord Alresford, mine was a misery which then almost bereft me of the powers of reason ! I feared you ! I knew my conduct had been reprehensible, so long as the engagement subsisted between us, in the highest degree. Try if you can consider me during that evening not responsible for my actions. I saw your contempt ; but ah, it did not exceed that I afterwards felt for my own deed ! ”

“ Nay ; not contempt, Mildred, ” replied the Earl, in gentler tones. “ I lamented that you thought it necessary to persevere in so dubious a path, and lacked sufficient candour to open your heart to me, to whom your confidence is due. Believe me, had you done so, the miser-

able anxiety of the last few days would have been spared you. Now, tell me, what was the purport of your journey to meet Colonel Sutherland this morning?"

"To ascertain the fact of his engagement. I could not rest until I knew whether I had been deceived—trifled with!" replied Mildred, colouring, and smiling bitterly.

"And how did you reply to the confession of his attachment, Mildred?"

"How? By imploring him to proceed forthwith to Moreton; which he promised on his honour to do to-morrow. I knew no other way of making atonement to Miss Conway. Have I now finished my humiliating confessions, Lord Alresford?" asked she, hiding her face in her hands.

Lord Alresford mused for some time. Mildred sat motionless—silent in the bitterness of her spirit. Presently, he seated himself by her on the couch, and gently removed the cold, trembling fingers which clasped her brow.

"Mildred, let me look in your eyes. I have one more question to ask you," said he, gently. His tones went to her heart, so that she even forgot her awe.

She raised her tearful eyes, and faintly smiled.

An eloquent and illustrious father of the Church has said, "Nothing is sweeter than tearful eyes. For this is the noblest member we have, and the most truthful, and the soul's own, and therefore we are so bowed therewith as though we saw the spirit itself lamenting;" and this same witchery seemed to be felt, too, by Lord Alresford.

"I will forgive you all the past, Mildred, if you will now answer me truly and honourably. Deceit on this point could but entail upon us additional misery and alienation. Have you given your affection to Colonel Sutherland? Forgive me, if my question pains you, but there must not—there shall not be reserve between us on this matter!" added he, quickly, as she hurriedly drew her hand from his grasp.

How unutterably thankful did Mildred now feel that she could truthfully answer in the negative!

"Whatever delusion I might once have cherished has vanished. It was a delusion, and is consequently dissipated for ever!" replied she, earnestly.

"Are you sure you read your own heart aright?"

"Perfectly. Colonel Sutherland can never more be anything to me," added she, bitterly.

"Then let the past be forgotten, Mildred, and I own you again as my betrothed," said Lord Alresford, taking her hand, and slightly touching with his lips her fair forehead. "But, as you value your own peace; as you prize the happiness which the future may some time have in store for us, build not up again a reserve which can but tend to our further alienation. May I not reasonably expect the unreserved confidence of a woman, who, whatever may be her motives, has a second time pledged herself willing and ready to stand towards me in the nearest and dearest possible relation? Answer me, Mildred: will you withhold this confidence?"

"Indeed, from henceforth, I will try to be everything you desire," murmured she. "And yet, Lord Alresford, judge not so harshly of me, I beseech you, as to imagine that either irritation or expediency have induced me to solicit your forgiveness,"—she paused abruptly, for she felt she could assign no cause.

"What your motive is, Mildred, I will not now urge upon you. To your conscience, I leave it. One thing more," continued the Earl, with some hesitation, while the colour mounted to his brow: "the compact between our parents, on which our engagement is formed, is surely well

known to you ; but I fain would trust you have done me the justice to feel assured that, be your decision what it may, Lord Elvaston's claim on what he has so long and nobly used, cannot thereby be affected in the smallest degree. Forgive me, if I distress you, Mildred ; but you know I am acting in perfect frankness, in accordance with my own counsel and advice to you," added the Earl, kindly, as he noticed the rising flush on her cheek.

"I never doubted your generous forbearance, my lord ; but it is now my most earnest desire to fulfil that compact in every respect."

Lord Alresford smiled.

"Now, Mildred, tell me what it was that first lured your allegiance from me ?" asked he, after a pause of some minutes.

"In the first place, you left me to my own cogitations, in a manner, you must confess, my lord, anything but flattering to my *amour propre*."

"Granted : and you feared me also, Mildred ?"

"I do not know whether I am totally free from that feeling even now," replied she, more truthfully than she would have been inclined seriously to admit.

"Had my terrors been sufficient to awe your

perversity into submission, Mildred, I should be more inclined to admit the reality of your words," said the Earl, laughing. "But if such a feeling really does exist, I certainly advise you to get rid of it as fast as possible, as very inimical to the *entente cordiale* I intend to subsist between us. What is your third charge?"

"You arrived here without giving me the slightest intimation of your visit. Had I not a right to expect this, my lord?"

"Undoubtedly, Mildred. But you forget you had placed a bar to our correspondence, by neglecting to answer any of the letters I wrote to you from Venice."

This was unanswerable. She felt ashamed of the evident fallacy of her argument. She knew, and inwardly confessed, that none of these things had been the actuating source of her alienation. The wound lay deeper; though little did she then divine how profound a fountain of bitterness lurked in her heart. She looked in the clear, calm eyes riveted on her face, and longed to pronounce that name which for months haunted her imagination, fostered her suspicion, and pursued her even into the dangerous paths of dissimulation. She could have wept, but pride restrained her tears, and sealed her lips.

Lord Alresford perceived some *arrière pensée* lingered.

"The only way, Mildred, I see likely to bring about a good understanding between us, is no longer to delay our marriage. When once we feel our mutual happiness rests irrevocably in each other's power, we shall, perhaps, then learn not to trifle with it," resumed he, after a few minutes' meditation, very gravely. "This evening, therefore, it is my intention to speak to your father, and ask the fulfilment of our contract one month hence; and, after what has just now passed between us, Mildred, you surely will not demur."

"It is very, very soon. Lord Alresford, I beseech you, ask me not yet to leave dear mamma," hastily rejoined she, as imagination vividly pictured the cold glories of Amesbury Park.

"Not too soon, as I am sure you will acknowledge. Amesbury must be your home ere five weeks elapse. I see no end, otherwise, to countless misunderstandings," replied Lord Alresford, coldly and decisively. "I feel assured, Mildred, your good sense will not refuse to cement our reconciliation by this trifling concession."

"This is arbitrary!" murmured she, in a choking whisper.

"It is needful. Think me not harsh: but Amesbury must receive its mistress within the next five weeks, if ever that mistress is to be Mildred Effingham!" said the Earl, resolutely.

"This threat is uncalled for, Lord Alresford!" replied Miss Effingham, resentfully, rising from the sofa, and sweeping back her beautiful ringlets from her brow. "Settle the period of our marriage with my father, my lord, and you shall find me all obedience;" and she would have quitted the room, but the Earl firmly retained her hand in his.

"Nay, Mildred, 'tis not thus we part! stay, yet, a little quarter of an hour," and he drew her again on the sofa by his side. "I have much to hear and to relate," said he, with one of those smiles Helen pronounced so fascinating.

Mildred assented: for how could she, with any propriety, do otherwise? A quarter of an hour elapsed—then another. Presently the dressing bell rang, and the library door opened, and Lady Elvaston entered. She paused, in amazement, for the silvery tones of her idolized Mildred smote on her ear, and she perceived her seated by the

Earl in the recess of the tall window. Lord Alresford instantly seized Mildred's hand, and led her towards her mother.

"Dear Lady Elvaston, congratulate me. I have, at length, prevailed upon Miss Effingham to empower me to demand the fulfilment of our contract a month hence. May I not rely on your intercession with Lord Elvaston?"

"Is it possible? Mildred, my darling child!" exclaimed Lady Elvaston, gazing anxiously on her daughter's burning cheek.

"Mamma, are you not very happy? Why do you not congratulate me?" cried Mildred, hastily throwing her arms round her mother's neck to conceal the tears which gushed from her eyes. "Now, mamma, I shall leave Lord Alresford to relate how your indulged, petted Mildred was brought to her senses," continued she, darting towards the door.

As she passed, her eyes fell accidentally on the small writing table at which Lord Alresford was occupied when she entered. Upon the blotting-case was a sheet of paper half written over, and on the table by its side lay a letter, on the envelope of which she recognised the Avington post-mark, and the pale, fairy-like

characters penned by the young mistress of War-dour Court.

It was evident her unexpected entrance interrupted the Earl's reply to her communication; yet the name of the Lady Catherine had never been mentioned between them.

CHAPTER XI.

A FORTNIGHT elapsed—and at length the day fixed for the much-talked-of Dornton ball arrived. Invitations to the amount of several hundreds had been issued; for as there was nothing that Mrs. Wedderbourne and the deceased Judge delighted in so much as in exhibiting their pomp and wealth to crowded assemblies, the ball-room at Dornton Park was built on a most magnificent scale, and everything money could command was lavished to make their entertainments the most *recherché* and aristocratic of the county. Mrs. Wedderbourne had now been a widow full fifteen months, and though the good lady hovered on the shady side of sixty, the fortitude and self-denial she so long evinced in denying the gratification of her inherent love for ostentatious show, can alone be appreciated by persons who, like herself, find all pleasures dreary and wearisome, save those culled at random on the

margin of the factitious and troubled whirlpool of fashion and excitement.

True though it was, that Mrs. Wedderbourne had solaced the dreary period of her seclusion, after "that untoward event of the dear, kind Judge's unlucky death," to quote her own words, by an occasional horticultural fête, a select dinner party, or a meet of the hunt; which latter she declared, "made Dornton look like Dornton again," yet the busy preparation for her ball appeared to rouse the widow's faculties to increased vigour and *aplomb*. Early on the important day she might have been seen up betimes, superintending the decorations of her rooms, the suspending of coloured lamps in the trees of the avenue and amidst the plants in her magnificent conservatory, the wreathing of pink calico and garlands, scolding her footmen, lecturing her maid, haranguing poor Caroline Vincent on the incalculable advantages she possessed in having her majority celebrated by so sumptuous a fête, and in unpacking those tempting-looking deal cases from the *magazin* of some first-rate *modiste*, containing her own and Caroline's delicate toilette for the all-engrossing evening festivity. Next she paid a visit to the housekeeper's room, and after boring that important functionary with a thousand

distracting queries, she put on her bonnet and proceeded to the stables, to make inquiries whether due preparation for the entertainment of her guests' horses, was proceeding in that department. She then continued her promenade to the lodges, and after there inspecting the arrangements for the evening's illumination, concluded by a forcible admonition to the lodge-keepers and their wives to be on the *qui vive*, and not suffer any vehicle of whatsoever description to pass the gates after nine o'clock, without first exhibiting the pink ticket, with which all her expected guests were provided; Mrs. Wedderbourne having a horror, lest the *éclat* of her assembly should be marred by the insolent intrusion of any of those presumptuous personages, who, both in India and the United Kingdom, will take advantage of a crowd to intrude themselves: besides which, as Watson her butler remarked, "the dear Judge's superb gold plate, and candelabra almost required the protection of a special division of the county police force." The garden and bouquets next came under our enterprising hostess's surveillance, until, at length, the round of her investigations led her again to the portico of the mansion; and hot and weary she entered her morning room, where, to her intense disgust and indignation, she found her niece

quietly lounging in the depths of a well-stuffed arm-chair, devouring the pages of a new novel.

Caroline Vincent was the orphan child of the late Judge's only sister. When he returned from the East, Dornton from thenceforth became her home; she received a fashionable education, and everybody began to look upon her as the eventual heiress of the Judge's ingots. Great, therefore, was the amazement, when, on the reading of his will, it was discovered that all his property, both real and personal, was bequeathed unreservedly to his widow; his niece being left totally dependant on her aunt's good pleasure: her name appearing only in the last clause of the will, which merely stated *his desire*, that in case Caroline Vincent rendered herself acceptable by dutiful and loving attention to her widowed aunt, Dornton and its appendages, on the latter's death, might become hers.

"My dear Caroline, you must be well aware how greatly I appreciate your general excellent and high-principled conduct," said Mrs. Wedderbourne to her niece, some two months after the Judge's death, as they sat at work in the disconsolate widow's darkened boudoir; drawing from the recesses of her sandal-wood work-table the important clause, which she had caused to be transcribed on a slip of parchment. "I know," con-

tinued she, "had the Dornton estates been bequeathed to you, I should still have found the same love and dutiful consideration. But, my love, I wished to observe, it rests entirely with you, whether I carry into effect this clause, dictated by your very considerate, generous uncle. It, of course, depends upon whom you marry; for my duty to my ever-to-be-lamented and revered husband, peremptorily forbids me making any testamentary bequest, likely to hand the place he loved so well into the possession of some upstart, vulgar plebeian. I am sure, my dear Carry, you comprehend my motives, so, if you please, we will expatiate no longer on this very unpleasant topic."

Mrs. Wedderbourne, as may be divined from the above short specimen of her oratory, was a devout worshipper of rank. A lady, or a gentleman, therefore, with an "honourable" prefixed to his or her name, came in for a most distinguished share of the Dornton honours—a baroness, or a countess was welcomed as the most delectable object in creation. Mrs. Wedderbourne had wealth, but she looked to Caroline to surround the wide spreading Dornton manors with the halo of rank. She dearly loved those outward tokens of respect paid to her circumstances, if not to herself; and

never did her spirit repose more complacently on its worldly privileges, than when she drove into the neighbouring town of Stanmore with her sleek bays and powdered footman, and witnessed the profound homage which everywhere greeted her.

Yet, notwithstanding all her strainings after it, Mrs. Wedderbourne was not a popular person. True popularity is the offspring of a character guileless, unselfish, amiable, and charitably disposed toward the faults and failings of others; untiring and Christian in its use of those faculties, and means at its disposal for the benefit, and gratification of others. Amongst the higher classes, those whom Mrs. Wedderbourne delighted in calling "her set," she was ridiculed for her ostentatious love of display, and her eager desire to gain their applause and friendship; amongst the lower, experience soon revealed the hollowness of her professions of goodwill: for, though the Lady of Dornton, to insure that popularity she panted for, caused the gates of her park to be thrown open to the public every Monday, yet the multitudes of obstacles thrown in the path of every visitor soon made all but strangers give up the delusive pleasure, and left her woods and gardens in that aristocratic seclusion which she fancied lent a new dignity to her possessions. She wished her neighbours, she said,

to profit by her beautiful flowers, and, accordingly, she condescended to patronize the floral shows in the little town of Stanmore; but her gardeners were strictly forbidden to divulge the names, mode of culture, or other peculiarities of the splendid contributions from the Dornton conservatories. The same with her guests: though she professed to invite *everybody* to her large *réunions*, yet it was well known that one of Mrs. Wedderbourne's friendly invitations was, at the very least, the certain warrant of two descents of gentility, which she had as thoroughly investigated as ever did the Chapter of Noble Ladies of Maubeuge the twenty hereditary proofs of nobility, paternal and maternal, requisite to entitle an aspirant to the dignity of canonesse of their illustrious order.

But to return from our digression on Mrs. Wedderbourne and her peculiarities: the Campbells, amongst hosts of others, received an invitation to her ball. As friends of the Elvastons, it would have been much against the usual tenor of her politics to have passed them by; but, independently of this weighty consideration, she really cherished a kind of *faiblesse* for Archibald Campbell. Of Helen, she had been overheard to say, when irritated, and declaiming against the listless apathy and affected fine ladyisms of her niece, that "that pretty,

modest Helen Campbell was sure to do well, either with sixpence or sixty thousand pounds in her pocket." Altogether, therefore, the family stood well in her estimation. Mr. Campbell properly, however, declined her invitation; but it was arranged that Mrs. Campbell and her two sons should go, while Lady Elvaston insisted on taking Helen.

And Mildred—how had it fared with her during the past fortnight? Even as it will and must do with all when recovering from the intoxicating delusion of passion, based neither on religion, reason, or esteem. She suffered acutely; for a change had come over the spirit of her dream, and now imagination—that fruitful multiplier of painted shadows and brilliant ideals—lay subdued and dormant, she was beginning to appreciate at its proper value that position she had so long scorned, and rashly trifled with. Gradually an ardent longing sprang up in her bosom to assimilate herself more and more with a character, the varied excellences of which she was daily becoming more sensible of; and she needed no longer Helen's lips to contrast the upright, manly demeanour of her betrothed, with Colonel Sutherland's selfish conduct. Mildred had courageously made all the amends in her power to atone for her error:—so far as this went, she now reaped the reward of her

rectitude, in the absence of that feeling of guilty deceit with which we know how sorely she was oppressed; but although she thus felt her integrity and self-respect restored, the immediate reward was not happiness. A fear, a melancholy presentiment tortured her, that in the pursuit of a vision she had for ever forfeited peace. She knew she was forgiven; but was her offence forgotten, and its impression erased? And this she had no means of ascertaining. Lord Alresford, since the evening of their conversation, never alluded to the subject—never expressed his opinion on any one point of her past conduct—never made even the slightest attempt to elucidate her true sentiments respecting himself. What did this *insouciance* portend?—total alienation, or a keen anxiety lest closer investigation might reveal a character still more irreclaimable and shallow?

The very evening of their reconciliation, the Earl applied for her father's consent that their marriage might be solemnized after the interval of a month; Lord Elvaston, after vainly pleading for further delay, unhesitatingly gave his assent, and so the matter had been finally arranged. But though now Lord Alresford was her constant companion, and they read, walked, and rode together; though he was most kind and

attentive, and appeared gladly, as she thought, to welcome her presence, her awe of him was undiminished: the little magical word *love* had never once escaped his lips; and, with the exception of that one cold caress on her forehead the afternoon of their reconciliation, her intimacy with Sir Gerard Baynton was now established on as familiar a footing. Often as she walked by the Earl's side, she longed to burst the restraint between them; to ask what *now* was the barrier to that near and familiar intercourse of spirit which she felt ought to unite them: but poor Mildred dreaded the probing of her own heart; and, more than all, she sickened at the bare supposition that the Lady Catherine Neville's was the hand which turned the fruits of her repentance into bitter ashes upon her lips.

All these varied hopes and fears Mildred imprisoned in her own heart; for not even to Helen could she reveal the suspicion which tortured her. Would not Helen, after all that had passed, look with contempt on a change so sudden, a spirit so vacillating? People little suspect how much advantage, opportunity, and consolation are lost by foolish solicitude as to how we appear, or are likely to stand in the opinion of others; and by a vain deference and morbid sensibility to public censure,

on matters which undeniably ought to be left to the conscience and sole option of those whom they alone regard.

Helen, however, was by no means an unsuspecting spectator of the change gradually operating in her friend's sentiments; but both she and Lady Elvaston agreed on the wiser course of not abruptly forcing an avowal, either by comment or remark, which might tempt Mildred's pride to recoil from the consummation they both so profoundly desired.

In this state, so unsatisfactory to Mildred, affairs progressed until the day of Mrs. Wedderbourne's ball. The following morning, Lord Alresford was to depart to Amesbury for a week, to make arrangements for the reception of his bride, and on his return the marriage was to be immediately celebrated. This last day had been spent as usual; but no further approach to a more intimate understanding was achieved, so that Mildred, dispirited and unhappy, entered her dressing-room to prepare for the ball with feelings little in accord with the gay preparations at Dornton. This was the first and last time she was to appear in public with Lord Alresford as his *fiancée*, and a sort of nervous tremor crept over her. The excitement, however, threw such

a lustre over her beautiful face, and her cheek glowed with so delicate and soft a colour, that Helen, as she entered the room a few minutes before they descended to the drawing-room, paused in admiration. Aglaë was adding the last touches to Mildred's simple, elegant toilette.

"Voyez, mademoiselle!" said Aglaë quickly, placing a bracelet in Helen's hands.

It was a beautiful bracelet given by Lord Alresford to Mildred on his former visit to the Priory.

"Dear Mildred, will you not wear this? It would be a kind and graceful compliment to the Earl," said Helen persuasively, taking the sparkling gems, and clasping them round Mildred's wrist.

"No, no, Helen! I cannot appear so great a hypocrite. Lord Alresford believes me heartless and unfaithful. I will not wear this gift—one of his few gifts—until he again clasps it on my arm!" exclaimed she, hurriedly quitting the room.

In the drawing-room, they found Lord and Lady Elvaston and their guests awaiting them. Lord Alresford stood by Lady Elvaston on the hearth-rug, and Helen thought his eye expressed satisfaction as it lingered a moment on Mildred's elegant figure.

"Come, young ladies, make haste, and take your coffee," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, as he glanced proudly from his beautiful daughter to Helen, who certainly looked as pretty and graceful in her snowy muslin dress as can be imagined. "Madame Wedderbourne will think her ball fairly in eclipse until her two belles arrive! Upon my word, Helen, you look dazzling!"

"Ah, Miss Campbell, who shall say you do not owe to me some addition to your very becoming toilette?" said Sir Gerard, presenting Helen with a bouquet of lovely flowers.

Helen slightly blushed.

"It is indeed a beautiful bouquet. How very much I feel obliged to you, Sir Gerard," said she, hastily.

"Come, my dear; come, Mildred: the horses have been standing at the door this half-hour. Sir Gerard, I leave Miss Campbell to your care," cried Lord Elvaston, hurrying his wife from the room.

At the hall door were two carriages. Lady Elvaston, her daughter, and Lord Alresford occupied the first; Lord Elvaston, Helen, and Sir Gerard followed in the other. The night was clear; and though dim twilight hung over the distant landscape, and shrouded the trees and

hedgerows in shadowy purple mist, objects along the roadside were distinctly visible. Lady Elvaston spoke little; neither did Lord Alresford appear inclined for conversation; and as for Mildred, her mind was busy contrasting her present feelings with those under which she had first contemplated Mrs. Wedderbourne's entertainment, and the certainty of sharing its pleasures with the man, who then, of all others, captivated her fancy. An unaccountable sadness weighed down her spirits, and could she only have consulted her own inclination, gladly would she have ordered the horses' heads to be turned, and the road to the Priory retraced. It was while absorbed in reflections as little consolatory and comfortable, that Mrs. Wedderbourne's dazzling illuminations burst on her vision, and the carriage rolled along up the avenue, which was blazing with pink, blue, and orange lights.

As the party approached the house, the loud clash of a military band burst upon their ears; and Lady Elvaston, who appeared highly amused at the elaborate preparations of their hostess, putting her head out of the window, perceived that the sounds proceeded from a kind of open pavilion in the centre of the lawn, exactly opposite the portal of the mansion, sur-

mounted by a flag, emblazoned with the late Judge's arms, waving between two large coloured lights.

"The band of the — Dragoons. Of course the officers are amongst Mrs. Wedderbourne's guests," said Lady Elvaston, anxiously, turning and half glancing in her daughter's face.

Mildred quietly smiled: a month ago she would have deemed this *sang froid* as improbable, as that she could ever have a feeling in common with her betrothed. As to the rest, she felt no disquietude at meeting Colonel Sutherland; for, a few days previously, she had delicately hinted the probability of this rencontre to the Earl, who promptly replied—

"Of course, Mildred, you will carefully avoid any singularity calculated to attract public attention, and consequently impertinent comment. If Colonel Sutherland asks you to dance, I should advise you to comply."

"For Heaven's sake, let us be going, else this confounded din will drive me wild!" exclaimed Lord Elvaston, impatiently, as they lingered for a moment at the open windows of the apartment assigned by Mrs. Wedderbourne for the cloak room of her guests.

"Mildred, you will accept my arm," said Lord

Alresford, in a low voice, crossing to the spot where she stood.

Silently she complied. Her colour wavered a little.

"Well, Miss Campbell, fortune for once favours me. I shall take possession of you as my lawful prize," said Sir Gerard, stepping forwards and drawing the hand of the blushing Helen under his arm.

"Eh! What's that you are saying, Baynton? I must put my veto on any premature *enlèvement* of my favourite Helen!" cried Lord Elvaston, laughing.

"Ah, my Lord, I fear my interest in Miss Campbell's favour will only extend to her honouring me with her hand for the very limited period of a quadrille and a couple of polkas!" rejoined Sir Gerard, hastily.

When the ball-room doors were flung open, Mrs. Wedderbourne would have been content with the effect produced on her guests by the very brilliant *coup d'œil* her suite presented. Most of the company had assembled, and lights and jewels glittered in the long vista of rooms; bright eyes sparkled, and exquisite toilettes, some of gossamer texture, floated in the giddy whirl of the waltz; others, of satin or velvet, fell in rich deep folds

around the figure of some magnificent dowager, as she slowly paraded up and down. Garlands and festoons of the rarest and most lovely flowers, mixed with draperies of pale pink and silver, adorned the walls and doorways. Beyond the conservatory, which was brilliantly illuminated, Mrs. Wedderbourne had caused a small garden, which she honoured with the epithet of "her own," to be roofed in; and here our indefatigable hostess exhausted the utmost limit of her own and her niece's imaginative genius. Rude imitations of the majestic scenery of Switzerland, burst with what was intended to be startling effect on the eye,—huge blocks of granite, piled one above another, intermixed with ponderous masses of slag, around the rough gnarled edges of which the good lady of Dornton had vainly coaxed, for weeks past, the verdant tendrils of some delicate mountain creeper. At stated intervals, a mimic cascade gushed over the rocks, and fell with a sudden dash (which, ridiculous as it may appear, certainly startled the fair loungers on the *canapés* in the adjoining conservatory), into a deep precipice, that looked very gloomy and horrible, as Mrs. Wedderbourne thought, when the rush of water ceased, and many a laughing eye peered down into its dismal depths. There were, besides,

grottos, sylvan bowers, green arches, murmuring fountains, lights so subdued as to shed around a twilight soft and mysterious; and the air, moreover, was laden with the perfume of multitudes of choice exotics. All was so luxurious, so fresh, and inviting, that a murmur of delight—just tribute to the inventive faculties of the wealthy hostess and her niece—spontaneously burst from the lips of each fair damsel, as, heated with the dance, she strolled, leaning on the arm of her partner, and sank on the tempting divans on the margin of the fountain.

Mrs. Wedderbourne received her guests in a small ante-chamber, opening into the principal ball-room, and there she stood, when Lady Elvas-ton and her party entered, in front of a gold Louis Quatorze chair, looking as dignified and imposing as black velvet, point, and diamonds, could render her. Near her stood another chair, on which lay Miss Vincent's handkerchief and fan, as she had particularly insisted that her niece should remain by her side, and assist in receiving the guests; but the fair Caroline, unable longer to withstand the united temptation of Jullien's band and Sir Richard Tennyson's entreaties, suffered herself to be carried away to the dance. This small room, however, was thronged with people, many of whom

were perfect strangers to Lady Elvaston. A buzz of admiration, however, prevailed when Mildred, leaning on Lord Alresford's arm, closely followed her mother. Never had she looked more radiantly beautiful, and the novelty of her *entrée* cast a glow over her cheek.

"I think I never saw a more distinguished-looking man than Lord Alresford. There is something so good, and noble in the expression of his face. Don't you think Mildred Effingham a very beautiful creature, Mr. Norwood?" said Clara Tennyson, as they paused for a few minutes at the folding-doors, just as Lady Elvaston was exchanging compliments with Mrs. Wedderbourne.

"Why, yes, she shows blood, and fire likewise, in those magnificent eyes of hers," replied Mr. Norwood, critically examining Mildred from head to foot; "she is a very particular friend of yours, Miss Tennyson, isn't she? or, I was going to observe ——"

"Observe nothing to me, I beg, Mr. Norwood, but what is highly flattering to Miss Effingham!" peremptorily interposed Miss Tennyson. "Have you ever been introduced to the Earl? I should imagine not, as I fancy your pursuits lie rather apart?"

"Why, I can't say I ever met his Lordship at

Newmarket, though I have in town occasionally. But I can tell you, Miss Tennyson—whether it is that his Lordship piques himself on his favour with the ladies, or on his rank and riches—he thinks no small things of himself. He keeps one at arm's length with a vengeance!”

“Really, I am surprised to hear you say so. I have always found him very agreeable; though certainly there is a reserve in his manner. You know, of course, he is engaged to Miss Effingham?”

“The deuce he is! Well, you really surprise me! I never should have guessed that, from what I saw at Fernley the other day. I wonder how Sutherland feels this evening. You ladies are really unfathomable! But I'll tell you what, I will contrive to scrape acquaintance with his Lordship to-night, to please you, Miss Tennyson, and give him an invitation to the Chartleigh steeplechase next month,” said Mr. Norwood, good-naturedly.

“Do. Now, really, he will like it of all things, Mr. Norwood,” replied Clara, laughing loudly. “I am sure, also, Mildred will feel gratified. By-the-bye, I wish I could get to speak to her. Stay! never mind, it will do presently; she is talking, I see, to Mrs. Wedderbourne,” said she, restrain-

ing the efforts of her boisterous admirer to drag her through the throng.

At this instant there was a momentary lull of voices, and Mrs. Wedderbourne's smoothly-pitched tones were wafted forwards to the spot where they stood. She was addressing Lord Alresford.

"I assure your Lordship, I have regretted excessively that serious indisposition has prevented sooner the honour of making your acquaintance since your arrival in our county; especially as my charming young friend, Miss Effingham, had long promised me the pleasure of an early introduction."

"That's what I call soft sawder, Miss Tennyson," whispered Mr. Norwood, with a laugh, seizing his partner's hand. "But come, these strains are enough to make the walls dance—let's have another turn;" and away they whirled.

"Stay a minute, I beseech you. Really, Mr. Norwood, this polka will be the death of me. I want to speak to Miss Campbell, and Sir Gerard Baynton, who are just coming towards us," cried Miss Tennyson, suddenly retreating from the circle of dancers. "How d'ye do, Miss Campbell? Sir Gerard, I hope I see you well, whole, and entire, without ache or pain, since your stroll at Fernley; for never having caught a glimpse of

you since, I cannot fix a later date for my inquiries."

"Oh, thank you; really I never felt better in my life. That walk with you, Miss Tennyson, up the Abbey hill, was as reinvigorating as a month at Kissingen!" exclaimed Sir Gerard, laughingly, as he and his partner flitted past.

Lord Alresford, in the meantime, as Mildred and her mother were still conversing with Mrs. Wedderbourne, leisurely surveyed the throng for which she had made such magnificent preparation. Suddenly his eye rested on a lady seated far back on an ottoman, rather screened from view by muslin draperies. She was dressed in pale blue crape, and a profusion of fair ringlets encircled a face remarkable for nothing save extreme freshness of complexion, and large, gentle, dove-like eyes. Her figure was very elegant; her air, and the exquisite finish of her toilette and manner, indicated that graceful ease and self-possession rarely acquired but by habitual intercourse with society, and that of the highest kind. She smiled, as her eyes met those of the Earl, who appeared excessively astonished at seeing her.

"Mildred," said he in a whisper, "I will be with you again in a few minutes, for yonder, much to my surprise, I perceive one of my old Venice

friends, Mrs. Rayland, and I must go and exchange a few words with her. Of course, I claim my privilege of dancing with you first."

Mildred's eyes followed the Earl across the apartment. She saw Mrs. Rayland half rise from her seat, and extend her fair hand, while the pleasure the meeting afforded both parties, was sufficiently indicated by the heartiness of their greeting. Mrs. Rayland's pretty features beamed with satisfaction, as she invited the Earl to seat himself on the divan by her side, and her gestures were so elegant, so free from affectation, or *empressement*, that Mildred involuntarily sighed.

"Will you dance, Miss Effingham, or will you permit me to lead you to a seat, where you will be less incommoded by the crowd?" said Archibald Campbell, who for some moments had been standing behind her unperceived. "The Earl, I suppose, will soon have finished his colloquy yonder, and will be back to claim your hand; but even for a short time, I fear you may find this crushing unpleasant," continued he, glancing somewhat indignantly across the room.

"Thank you. Lord Alresford has only left me for a second, to greet an old friend, so I will await his return by mamma," replied Mildred, hastily,

and a deeper shade of sadness seemed to steal over her spirits.

She glanced into the next room, and saw Helen's graceful figure whirling away in the dance, and the animated happy expression of pleasure which rested on the features of her partner—still Sir Gerard Baynton. The strains of music were enlivening, and on the faces of all around she saw smiles and seeming gaiety and happiness, contrasting painfully with the feelings that obtruded themselves in spite of her utmost efforts. Mildred had, however, too much *savoir vivre* to suffer the uneasiness which preyed on her spirits to be detected by the giddy multitude around. If Lord Alresford's indifference led him from her to play the agreeable to his lady friends, her pride supplied her with a sufficient quantum of non-chalant address to take it as a matter of course, and to act accordingly. Therefore, seldom did the sallies of the beautiful, witty Miss Effingham evince more aplomb; or never did a more brilliant *coterie* of all the handsomest and most eligible partners in a ball-room gather round Lady Elvaston and her daughter, than during the twenty minutes Lord Alresford chose to devote to the lovely Mrs. Rayland. Numberless were the entreaties that she would dispose of

her fair hand for the brief space of one of Jullien's most captivating polkas; but on this point Mildred was wisely inflexible, though more than once the temptation burned strongly to retaliate a little of the Earl's careless indifference on himself. Presently he arose from the side of Mrs. Rayland, and joined the group round her chair.

"I know what you are thinking about, Mildred," said Lord Alresford, as a few minutes after they slowly proceeded arm in arm towards the ball-room; "you are displeased, and consider my desertion of you just now unkind, even though it were to greet an old friend. Have I interpreted your serious looks aright?"

Mildred hesitated. Had she been candid, and avowed the exquisite pain these small, though oft repeated acts of cool *insouciance* in reality inflicted, all, even then, might have been well between them. But Mildred was piqued: and perhaps, also, elated by the flattering adulation and homage which she knew a single smile could command; and, forgetful for the moment of her own past misdemeanours, pride forbade her to manifest greater eagerness, or to appear to consider a larger share of assiduity desirable than what the Earl chose to offer.

Mildred then turned her eyes resolutely away, and answered in tones slightly constrained —

“ Oh, no : I have been laughing so heartily at Mr. Melford’s lively nonsense, that ——”

“ That you did not perceive my absence. I understand you, Mildred,” rejoined the Earl, quickly, as Miss Effingham paused, and the colour suffused her cheek.

“ What an extremely attractive looking person your friend Mrs. Rayland is ! Who is she ? and how came she here ?” asked Mildred, hurriedly, as Mrs. Rayland and her partner, Sir Richard Tennyson, passed them.

“ Mrs. Rayland is the wife of one of the attachés of the British Embassy at Naples, and a niece of the late Lord Willingham’s. She is on her way to visit her relative, Lady Catherine Neville, and came here with Mrs. Farnleigh, her husband’s sister,” responded Lord Alresford, coldly.

To Mildred’s jaundiced fancy, the mystery of the Earl’s warm salutation was now sufficiently explained. A cousin of Lady Catherine’s ! Mildred felt her heart close, and every kind impulse towards the elegant Mrs. Rayland enfold itself in its deepest recesses, as Lord Alresford led her to join the same quadrille in which she danced. An introduction then became inevitable ; but she watched, with jealous suspicion, every word which

passed the lips of the lady, as she kept up at intervals an animated dialogue with the Earl. Mrs. Rayland spoke of Italy; alluded to various excursions, balls, and fêtes where they had met; but, for a long time, she did not utter Lady Catherine's name, nor refer to anything in which she was concerned. Mildred was almost provoked to find how very unnecessarily her indignation had been kindled.

"These beautiful parterres remind me of the fête given at the Villa Pezzaro last autumn, only the flowers have not the intense fragrance of those blossomed under the fair sky of Italy. That was nearly the last and most pleasant of our many reunions: we had Catherine, and poor Lord Willingham, yourself, that very agreeable Mr. Randolph,—by-the-bye, have you seen or heard anything of him since your arrival in England, Lord Alresford?" said Mrs. Rayland, as, after the conclusion of the quadrille, she and her partner, Sir Richard, strolled into the conservatory and lingered for a few minutes near the couch on which Mildred sat.

"No: I met Mr. Randolph at Madame de Pezzaro's fête for the first time, and I have neither seen, nor heard of him since," replied the Earl.

"Mr. Randolph, in a very short time, contrived

to make himself wonderfully acceptable everywhere, I assure you, my lord. Fancy, Sir Richard," continued she, turning and addressing her partner, "a man, handsome, well dressed, of perfect *ton*, clever, and, apparently, rich enough to buy up all the petty Italian counts and marquesses at a bidding, yet so delightfully mysterious that no one could ever make out who he was, or whence he came: nor was he ever heard to allude to friend, relation, or connection in England or elsewhere; and you may form some slight idea of the hero of our Palermitan *soirées* last autumn."

"Upon my word, a perfect Monte Christo! I wonder you were not all afraid of dealing with so suspicious a character, Mrs. Rayland. You say his name is Randolph?" said Sir Richard.

"Yes; but he does not belong to the C——shire Randolph's; so much I contrived to extract from him. Pray, my dear lord, tell me your opinion of him, for I observed you several times in deep conversation together," said Mrs. Rayland.

"I thought him intelligent, well read, and agreeable; but I saw too little of Mr. Randolph to form any competent opinion. Indeed, I should hardly recognize him again. Is he still at Palermo?"

"Oh, no: after the Willinghams left, Mr. Randolph found us all far too insipid to remain. I met him once since at one of Princess Grassini's *soirées* during the carnival in Naples. His devoted attention to Catherine before she left Palermo drove poor Madame Pezzaro nearly frantic, and she did nothing but bitterly reproach herself for her imprudence in introducing him. It was even whispered Mr. Randolph would have proposed for her had not Lord Willingham given him distinctly to understand that his views for his daughter lay in another and more elevated quarter," said Mrs. Rayland, pointedly addressing herself to Lord Alresford, and smiling so as to disclose a row of the prettiest and whitest teeth imaginable.

Mildred raised her eyes from the ground and listened. A smile lurked round the Earl's well chiselled mouth as he turned towards the pretty manœuvrer.

"Well, Mrs. Rayland, I suppose you cannot but agree with me that, for this once, rumour could not have more faithfully represented Lord Willingham's sentiments," replied he.

"Of course. Lady Catherine must have been highly entertained at Mr. Randolph's presumption. By-the-bye, I shall be happy to take charge of any packet or message your Lordship may have

for Wardour Court or Amesbury, as I leave the Farnleighs to-morrow," said Mrs. Rayland, as she took her partner's arm, for Sir Richard was beginning to grow impatient at her delay.

"Thank you. I need not trespass on your kindness, for I intend to be at Amesbury myself to-morrow. Do you expect Rayland at Wardour?"

"Yes, and no. He has left me in a delightful state of uncertainty as to his movements," replied Mrs. Rayland, merrily, as she tripped away.

Though Mildred knew the Earl's journey to Amesbury had long been arranged, yet she could not repress a sudden thrill as she heard it now thus certainly alluded to. The feeling, likewise, that the misunderstanding between them was augmented instead of decreased, on this the last evening they were to spend in each other's society for some time, cast a melancholy gloom over her heart. A feeling of irritation also subsisted: she felt aggrieved. Mrs. Rayland evidently knew nothing of their engagement, and her inuendoes, and pointed manner, only more surely convinced poor Mildred that her suspicion of the mutual attachment of her betrothed and Lady Catherine was only too well founded. What, then, was the mysterious impediment which kept them asunder? Why had not Lord Alresford taken advantage of

her past vacillations, to free himself from a distasteful marriage? Preoccupied and miserable, Mildred sat, replying at random to the remarks of the Earl; who, spite of her visible disinclination, persisted in talking to her on every subject on earth, but the one nearest her heart. She thought she had seldom seen him more animated and agreeable, and it was clear he did not consider it worth while either to resent, or allude again to the cutting carelessness of the rejoinder she would now have given much to recall.

Meanwhile Mrs. Wedderbourne's ball proceeded as brilliantly as she could desire. All her guests seemed pleased and happy, and danced away in polka, valse, and quadrille, with indefatigable perseverance. Her niece Caroline, also monopolized a large share of the attentions of Sir Richard Tennyson; in short, nothing could exceed the extreme satisfaction which swelled Mrs. Wedderbourne's bosom, as she paraded her sumptuous suite of rooms.

"My dearest Helen, pray be careful, and do not venture in the conservatory whilst you are so hot. It strikes like an ice-house!" said Mrs. Campbell, suddenly accosting her daughter, who, escorted by Sir Gerard Baynton, passed the sofa on which she sat.

"Oh! Mrs. Campbell, this is a hint to me.

Think of my incorrigible carelessness in hurrying your daughter into such a danger again! What is this delicate-looking fabric on your arm? Will it not be more serviceable here?" asked Sir Gerard, laughing as he playfully took a lace scarf from Mrs. Campbell, and threw it lightly on Helen's shoulders.

"Helen appears in high spirits to-night. I hope she will not droop when this tremendous fuss at the Priory is over, her friend gone, and all excitement also. Sir Gerard Baynton seems monstrous attentive, to be sure!" said Miss Jenks, who, in consideration of her fiftieth cousinship with an Irish baronet, had been condescendingly presented by Mrs. Wedderbourne with one of her ball-tickets.

"Yes," said Mrs. Campbell, complacently watching the retreating figure of her daughter; "yes, Sir Gerard appears pleased to meet his old play-fellow again."

"Sir Gerard would make a nice match for Helen; only I understand he is such a dreadful flirt, there is no reliance to be placed on him. He pays attention to half a dozen girls at a time," observed Miss Jenks, slowly.

"Oh! very likely. Sir Gerard's happy spirits, and thoughtless good humour, may very probably lead him into offering lover-like attention to any

girl who pleases his fancy. Young ladies, nowadays, must learn not to take everything *au pied de la lettre*," rejoined Mrs. Campbell, with supreme indifference.

"Miss Helen had better avail herself of the good offices of her friend, Lady Alresford that is to be; for, I am told, despite his seeming good-humour, there is not a prouder, or a more exclusive man anywhere than Sir Gerard Baynton: yet, you know, there may be a slight chance of her pretty face and manner having made an impression on the baronet's heart," persisted Miss Jenks.

"My dear Miss Jenks, we ought to feel much indebted to you for weaving such fairy visions; which, I assure you, if realized, would give Mr. Campbell and myself more pain than pleasure; for, although Sir Gerard would make a tolerable match for Helen, were he to do the improbable thing of falling in love with her, we are in no hurry to part with our darling child."

Miss Jenks opened her dull, grey eyes to their utmost extent, and fixed them with a most incredulous expression on Mrs. Campbell's face.

"You are right, my dear friend; these violent smites are sure to go off. I never knew a match to result from one: though, perhaps, I should

except that of my own relation, Miss Arabella Jenks, eldest daughter of my friend and cousin, Sir Hercules Jenks, of Jenks Court, who met Sir Denis O'Lawlor at a ball, and married him the following week : but the case of a girl of Arabella's pretensions, of course, does not at all influence my opinion, and I only trust my favourite Helen will discreetly shut her ear to the baronet's flattery."

"You need not alarm yourself on Helen's account, Miss Jenks. Who is that gentleman dancing with Miss Tennyson?" asked Mrs. Campbell.

"The new squire of Chertleigh, boisterous Frank Norwood, whose harsh voice makes one's nerves shrivel! I should imagine poor, drowsy Lady Tennyson finds him a sad nuisance in her drawing-room after dinner: but you see he is rich, and Sir Richard has no objection to a partnership in horses and dogs; and, it seems, he goes down with the daughter also. Look, Lord Alresford has again betaken himself to the side of the young lady in blue crape. How wretchedly ill Miss Effingham looks to-night!" exclaimed Miss Jenks, as she watched Mildred, who was now dancing in a quadrille with Sir Gerard opposite to where they sat.

"Yes, she seems languid and pale; but this is

not much to be wondered at, considering the fatigues young ladies undergo nowadays," said Mrs. Campbell, good-naturedly. "Yet, look as she will, Mildred Effingham always appears a being of a different order to the girls around her: there is something so elegant and refined in her manner."

"That may be; but, at any rate, the Earl does not seem inclined quite to acquiesce, for yonder he lounges, with a smile of contentment on his very handsome face, by the side of the fair young lady in blue: and if ever he marries Miss Effingham, I shall say that on both sides it will be hands, not hearts, that are given!" said Miss Jenks, curling her little malicious lip.

"The lady whom Lord Alresford is conversing with is a Mrs. Rayland; and as to what you say about Mildred, I always hope for the best, Miss Jenks. You know there are some persons particularly undemonstrative in their manner; but, after all, more really true-hearted than their bustling neighbours."

"Undeniably so, my dear Mrs. Campbell, and I can only echo your insinuation, and trust it may be found all is well between Miss Effingham and her affianced. No one can wish her greater luck and happiness than myself."

"How do you do, Mrs. Campbell? What a bower of garlands Mrs. Wedderbourne has spread for her friends! I never saw any thing more beautiful than the *coup d'œil* on entering. I trust Miss Campbell is well, and my friend Archibald? I suppose I shall discover them both presently amid the throng," said Colonel Sutherland, advancing and shaking hands with Mrs. Campbell.

"Yes, they are well, and both here. I conclude you are only just arrived, as we have not met each other before?" replied Mrs. Campbell, inquiringly.

"Only about a quarter of an hour ago, and I have since been paying my devoirs to our hospitable hostess," answered the Colonel.

"Poor man! I dare say now he feels right glad that ceremony is over; for, though an admirable woman in every respect, Mrs. Wedderbourne's stupid, prosing pomposity is intolerable!" remarked Miss Jenks, as Colonel Sutherland retired. "But, my dear Mrs. Campbell, did you ever see anybody so altered in appearance as the Colonel? I doubt not he finds Miss Conway rather more unmanageable than Miss Effingham does Lord Alresford; and, upon my word, I must own that for engaged people, their flirtation was positively scandalous. I am glad Helen did not

join that mad-cap party from Settringham to the Fernley ruins a fortnight ago, for I hear from Betty Higgins, Sir Richard's groom's wife, that the Colonel and Miss Effingham did nothing but walk together, and that she actually saw them strolling alone in the wood in Mill Close. Now, I say, such conduct is perfectly disreputable."

"Be sure, Miss Jenks, Betty Higgins exaggerated. I make a rule never to believe more than exactly one-half of what I am told," said Mrs. Campbell, bustling away, heartily tired of Miss Jenks, and her acrid spite.

"Will you dance with me, Miss Effingham?" said Colonel Sutherland, approaching Mildred, as she sat by her mother's side, some half hour after he entered the room.

Mildred instantly arose.

"I was just entreating mamma to order the carriage," said she, hesitatingly.

"You cannot refuse my petition, Miss Effingham, after I have obeyed you—obeyed you to the very uttermost. Shall we join the waltz or the quadrille?" asked the Colonel, a shade of deep sadness flitting across his brow.

"The quadrille."

"In the next room, then. Miss Effingham, I tell you I have obeyed your commands, and yet

you will neither look at me, nor smile. Am I still unforgiven?"

"You have been staying at Moreton Place since we parted?" murmured Mildred, faintly.

"No, in its neighbourhood, with a connection, Mrs. St. Priest, ——"

"And Miss Conway?"

"According to my promise, I made plenary confession. You ladies, Miss Effingham, seem strange, resentful beings; but I must do Maude justice to say she behaved admirably."

"She has pardoned your faithlessness, and you are then reconciled?" asked Mildred, anxiously.

"Yes—reconciled, if you will, Mil—Miss Effingham. Our engagement is not broken. My frank confession (for I concealed nothing) was a terrible blow to Miss Conway's pride, which I fear she will not soon forget; and as for myself, I have bidden so long a farewell to happiness as almost to hail her indifference or resentment, as it holds out to me a longer prospect of freedom."

Mildred looked displeased. She hastily glanced towards the Earl, but he was talking to Lady Elvaston with as much *sang froid* as if Colonel Sutherland had not been present.

"Here come papa and Helen, doubtless, in

search of me; mamma, I see, is going away. Colonel Sutherland, you must excuse my dancing with you," exclaimed Mildred, suddenly breaking the long silence which followed his last remark. "We are returning home early this evening, as Lord Alresford leaves us to-morrow."

"One question more. When is your marriage to take place, Mildred?"

"In about ten days," faltered Mildred; "immediately on the Earl's return from Amesbury."

"I shall be far, far away from here by then, though my heart tells me I cannot bear banishment from your presence long," said the Colonel, sorrowfully. "Miss Effingham, may I not lead you to the carriage?"

"No, no! far better not," hastily responded she, as Lord Elvaston and Helen came up.

Mildred silently took her father's arm, and in a few minutes she was swiftly wafted away again from the whirl of Mrs. Wedderbourne's splendid entertainment, and the dazzling glare of her illuminations.

"So it is really quite decided you leave us to-morrow?" said Mildred, holding out her hand to take leave of the Earl for the night, as they stood alone together for a second in the drawing-room.

There was something in her tone which attracted Lord Alresford's attention. He looked earnestly in her face.

"Yes, indeed, Mildred, as you know. But why do you ask?" replied he, gravely and gently.

"Oh, nothing; for no especial reason, my lord," cried Miss Effingham, hastily withdrawing her hand; and, taking her candle, she quitted the room.

CHAPTER XII.

THE following morning, the party at the Priory was much diminished. Lord Alresford, at a very early hour, set off on his journey, after partaking of a solitary breakfast: a meal Mildred gladly would have shared, had she not been restrained by the uncomfortable feeling that her company might be considered intrusive; consequently, despite Lady Elvaston's gentle hints and final entreaty, that at least she would descend and bid farewell to the Earl, she contented herself with sorrowfully watching his retreating equipage from the window of her dressing-room, as it wound from the porch of the mansion. Sir Gerard Baynton also, unwilling to intrude on the last few days Mildred had to spend with her parents, accepted the oft-repeated invitation of the Tennysons; and returned home with them from Mrs. Wedderbourne's ball.

Lady Elvaston appeared sad—Mildred looked grave; and even Helen's lively face and smile were sobered into serious pensiveness, as they took their seats at the breakfast-table. Lord Elvaston likewise seemed to find matter of more than usual interest in his newspaper, and ate his breakfast in silence.

It was at length Lady Elvaston who broke the long spell; for no one appeared inclined to hazard an observation.

"You do not think also of leaving us this morning, my dear Helen; you will surely stay with Mildred until——" and Lady Elvaston turned away her head, unable even to allude to her child's approaching departure.

"I will do exactly what is most pleasant to you and Mildred, dearest Lady Elvaston. I need not, I am sure, say what my own inclination prompts me to do!" replied Helen affectionately.

"Then you will remain here," rejoined Miss Effingham, quickly.

And Helen staid at the Priory.

Only one more little week had now to glide away, and Mildred was then to become a bride! Her position had stolen so insensibly upon her—there had been such a total absence of bustle and preparation

—and even all allusion to the approaching event was so studiously avoided in her presence, and all outward things so regularly pursued their accustomed tenor, that poor Mildred was absolutely astounded when she reflected that seven short days were to usher in the most important event of her life; that in little more than seven times twenty-four hours she was to take a solemn vow to love and obey one whom she dreaded as a stern censor: one whom her perverse imagination accused of harbouring contempt, if not positive dislike, towards herself. For the first day or two, while alone with Helen, she did nothing but weep; and when in the presence of her parents, her swollen eyelids, and the excitement, and forced gaiety of her manner, sent a keen pang to her mother's heart. Yet had Mildred been compelled to a little self-examination, she would have found it a matter of some difficulty to account for the source of her abundant tears. Her feelings towards the Earl were inexplicable to herself. Cut to the quick by the cool *nonchalance* of his manner, wounded deeply by his occasional neglect, Mildred set a rigid watch over her words and actions. She haughtily refused to let him read the heart he disdained to win; and carefully suppressed every outward demonstration that might lead him

to suppose his indifference was not returned by like indifference on her part ; yet now had Lord Alresford stepped forward and offered to terminate her suspense and anxiety by the dissolution of their engagement, she would have recoiled shudderingly from his proposal.

In the paroxysms of despair which swept athwart her mind, she accused the Earl of haughty insensibility ; and her cheek burned as she indignantly recalled the frigid, unloverlike distance of his habitual bearing ; forgetful how often she had repelled his affection, and that now, if she wished all to be well between them again it was for her to evince, by a gentle winning deportment, that a change had indeed been wrought in her sentiments. Unfortunately Mildred thought not thus. The petted idol of all around her, she had invariably seen the world at her feet, and her spirit chafed to find her beauty, wit, and a thousand attractive qualities powerless to vanquish the stoicism of her betrothed, or to make him, at her behest, both forget and forgive her past infidelities ; and, fatally for her present peace, instead of attributing his coldness to displeasure at her perpetual caprice, and striving to amend, she sought its solution in an assumed attachment to the Lady Catherine Neville.

Somewhat comforted by Helen's vigorous exhortation, Mildred, after the expiration of a couple of days, recovered a portion of her serenity. They then walked together, revisited and lingered in every favourite haunt, and, arm-in-arm, strolled together through the beautiful gardens. A great part of their time was devoted to Lady Elvaston; but none could adequately divine the magnitude of the sacrifice she was about to make, or how fervently, in the solitude of her chamber, did she commend her beloved child to the keeping of Him whose mercy and love so tempers every trial, that what presently appears most hard to bear, eventually conduces to some great permanent good.

Nevertheless, it must not be supposed Mildred's wedding, though rather precipitate a one, was totally devoid of that agreeable excitement and bustle which usually usher in so happy an event. Mantua-makers and modistes, set to work by Lord Elvaston's munificent liberality, racked their powers of invention to provide the most elegant and costly wardrobe; and unbounded was Aglaë's rapture as she unpacked case after case, and spread out for her young mistress's inspection their varied contents. Every train brought a profusion of beautiful baubles, presents from distant friends;

and one fine morning a messenger from the Earl's jeweller in town arrived at the Priory, the bearer of a magnificent *parure*, part of the family diamonds which Lord Alresford had had reset for his bride.

"All very superb. A most splendid marriage gift, Helen! But Edward Sutherland would have given these jewels to me with his own hand," was Mildred's comment, as she pettishly pushed the glittering *ecrin* from her across the table to her friend.

Mildred had written to the Earl once since his departure. She had done so without remark of any kind to Helen; and on the fifth day after his farewell, as they were once more assembled for the morning meal, his answer was placed in her hand. She hastily tore asunder the envelope, and perused the letter without comment; but Helen thought her beautiful face appeared a shade graver, and there was a kind of nervous impatience in the hurried mode in which she folded it and transferred it to the pocket of her apron. However, she said nothing, but presently arose from the table and stood silently by the window for some moments; she then turned to Helen, and proposed that they should set out on a long rambling excursion, which had been in

contemplation for the last two days, and on their return call, *en passant*, at the Rectory, and see Mrs. Northcote. Helen, who plainly perceived her friend was struggling with some pique she would rather not divulge in her mother's presence, readily complied; and soon they were both equipped for their walk.

The day was delightful; the atmosphere, buoyant and transparent, interposed not a single cloud to mar the brightness of the deep-blue sky; and the soft, flowery turf yielded pleasantly to the tread, as they slowly traversed the park, and turned into one of those good old-fashioned green lanes, with mossy banks and tall hedge-rows, which, happily, even in this age of would-be improvement, are still to be found in some of the more secluded districts of merry Old England.

Mildred walked on silently for some time, and Helen did not care to interrupt her reverie; for she too, if the truth must be told, felt in a mood the reverse of communicative.

"In what a very taciturn humour we must both have risen this morning, Helen. I verily believe, since we first set out, we have not uttered half a dozen words. What are you thinking about?" at length, exclaimed Mildred.

"You have asked me a very puzzling question, Mildred, which I do not know how to answer. Shall I retort, and put the same query to you?"

"Ah, yes, Helen, my meditations have now reached their culminating point, and therefore can only centre on one theme. But I know what your thoughts were also: you were musing a little on the manifold eccentricities of my betrothed lord, a great deal about Sir Gerard Baynton, and at length your reverie subsided into a moderate degree of wonderment as to what the Earl and myself could possibly have to impart which would not brook the delay of a few days, considering the very cool terms on which we parted. Now, Helen, I will wager I have guessed correctly, by the demure look of propriety you are putting on," said Mildred, with some of her former liveliness.

"To say that I felt no surprise or curiosity as to the purport of your correspondence, Mildred, would be an untruth; so I will not attempt to refute your clairvoyante faculties on this point: though, after all, it was an absurd feeling, for, with your marriage so near, there must be many things on which you ought to be consulted."

"*Must and ought*, my dearest Helen, are very

fine sounding words ; but I assure you, I am far from presuming to offer an opinion on any of his Lordship's arrangements. The object of my letter was to prefer a petition, which I honestly confess, with many more, I had not courage to request in person."

"Well?"

"Well!" rejoined Miss Effingham, haughtily, "this morning's post brings me an absolute refusal! A charming foretaste of matrimonial felicity; is it not, Helen?"

"I am indeed astonished," exclaimed Helen, after a few minutes' pause, during which Miss Effingham's eyes were riveted on her face. "I could not have supposed it possible; unless, dear Mildred, in one of your desperate moods, you requested something very unreasonable."

"You shall judge of the propriety of my request; though, perhaps, you may secretly accuse me of a want of delicacy in disregarding your feelings, dear Helen. Extraordinary events, however, require extraordinary remedies, and I am resolved not a shadow shall interpose between me and one whom I love so much as yourself. I wrote to the Earl to ask his permission to invite you, my dearest Helen, to visit us at Amesbury immediately after our marriage—a request

he has chosen most arbitrarily to deny for the present!" said Mildred, angrily.

The blood mounted to Helen's brow.

"What you tell me pains me more than I can express," replied she, after an uncomfortable pause of a few seconds. "Does Lord Alresford assign any reason for my exclusion from Amesbury, Mildred?"

"None! Except, indeed, he condescendingly adds, that at the expiration of four months he will be happy to receive you as his guest." Helen walked gravely on. "But I assure you, dearest Helen," continued she, anxiously, "the Earl couches his refusal in such very flattering terms as regards yourself, and descants so eloquently on your many admirable qualities, that you will be quite appeased for the apparent slight on perusing his letter;—so what his motive can be in refusing me the consolation of your society, I cannot divine!"

"But I can, Mildred: I see it clearly, and the Earl is right! I beseech you, therefore, do not let any puerile resentment defeat his purpose," exclaimed Helen at length, earnestly. "He wishes to win your precious affection, and thinks that more likely to be obtained without the intervention of a third person; for you know when left

tête-à-tête dependent on each other, with no one for either party to fall back upon, must necessarily facilitate a better understanding."

"If I could but think his motive to be what you say, Helen! but you are totally mistaken. Humiliating as it may be to confess, Lord Alresford's approval and interest are centred in another: though I do not mean to say all might not have been well, but for that unfortunate affair with Edward Sutherland," rejoined Mildred, tears of wounded pride starting to her eyes.

"Oh, Mildred, you know of old I cannot agree with you here! Only smile on the Earl as you once did on Colonel Sutherland, and soon all will be well between you; and in the mean time the novelty of your position will prevent you dwelling so pertinaciously on the past."

"Well there is some comfort in the thought that this is a world of compensation; so what I lose on one side I shall probably gain on another!" ejaculated Mildred, with a sigh.

"We shall see! I predict the Earl will make an admirable husband; which is something gained, in my opinion," replied Helen, with a smile.

"Perhaps, Helen, '*Tanto buono che val niente*,' as the Italians say. But let us change the subject: what did you think of Mrs. Rayland?"

"I only exchanged half a dozen words with her; she appeared to me pretty, elegant, and good-natured."

"But dreadfully affected. Her manner struck me likewise as excessively free, especially when conversing with gentlemen."

"Probably she has contracted this familiar deportment (which, by-the-bye, Mildred, I did not observe) from long residence abroad."

"Perhaps! I wonder whether she at all resembles her cousin, Lady Catherine Neville!"

"You will soon be able to satisfy yourself on this point: but I should fancy not, for I understand Lady Catherine might almost be taken for a Spanish beauty ——"

"I only meant in manners and deportment," interrupted Mildred hastily. Mrs. Rayland's fanciful, deprecating air, when speaking to gentlemen, proves her at any rate a great flirt; and if Lady Catherine's much vaunted beauty is not overrated, I should imagine this to be the only possible *point de ressemblance* between the cousins."

"You have made up your mind it seems that Lady Catherine is a flirt, Mildred?"

"Perhaps the term 'flirt' is rather too strong an expression, but I certainly consider her a

coquette in the widest sense of the word, Helen," replied Mildred, resolutely.

"It is difficult to judge. I do not think we either of us know enough of her to pass so severe a censure. Sir Gerard speaks highly of her, and he has no reason that I can discern for giving her a more high-flown character than she deserves," argued Helen.

"Except that Sir Gerard, blinded by the well-turned panegyrics of his infallible friend, believes what he is told; and I fear has also thrown dust into your eyes, Helen," replied Miss Effingham, laughing. "By-the-bye, I have never had time to inquire into the beginning of that friendship which now has ripened into such hot alliance, Helen."

"I first knew Sir Gerard when I was a little, unruly sprite of six years old; and many were the mischievous pranks we played together. Papa quitted Weldon when I was nine; so, dear Mildred, your imagination will not have much to feed upon, as eleven long years intervened without my hearing or seeing anything of my quondam playmate: indeed, until I heard of his expected arrival at the Priory, I had almost forgotten such a being existed."

"All very fine, my dear Helen!" exclaimed

Mildred, with a saucy laugh. Then she added, in a graver tone, her smile vanishing, "I fervently trust, Helen, my redoubtable Earl has not formed any plan for honouring some unknown damsel with Sir Gerard's hand; as on many occasions his Lordship has displayed such disagreeable tenacity of purpose, that I should actually despair of frustrating his designs."

"As far as I am concerned you may very safely spare yourself any anxiety, Mildred, on Sir Gerard's account."

"Well, my dear Helen, we will not argue the point; but I may, of course, be permitted to retain my own opinion. I should fancy Sir Gerard is now heartily sick of Settringham, and its uproarious hilarity, and will be right glad to return to the Priory to-morrow. Does he ever talk to you about Lady Catherine, Helen? I would give much to obtain a clearer insight into her disposition; but I have never perused a line of her correspondence with Lord Alresford: contrary, you know, to your prediction, Helen," continued Miss Effingham, negligently.

Helen smiled, as she noticed the ever-recurring topic of her friend's meditations.

"Yes, Sir Gerard frequently mentions her," replied she, briefly; for Helen found it did more

harm than good to retail conversations on this very debateable personage, as Miss Effingham, with perverse petulance, was sure to seize on any discrepancy in the recital, and thus distort facts to the very opposite of what was intended.

"I do not know why I asked you this stupid question, Helen; it can be of very little consequence to me what Lady Catherine is like," rejoined Mildred, in a tone of pique at Helen's silence. "But here comes Miss Jenks to infuse an amiable diversity in our ideas," continued she, as they emerged from the lane into a large meadow, through which ran a footpath leading straight to the Rectory gate.

The prim, demure-looking spinster quickened her pace when she perceived the two young ladies, as the gleanings of her morning's prowling usually furnished a delectable mass of gossip for the edification of some village tea-party; invitations to which social meal she seldom lacked: as, unhappily, the inherent love of "hearing something new," prompts people in general (however much they may inwardly despise the character) to refrain from treating the scandalous busybody with the contempt and aversion so richly his due.

"Good-morning, young ladies. I hope I find you both well this lovely day? I trust her lady

ship has recovered the fatigue of the Dornton gala?"

After being assured of the flourishing state of their health, and Lady Elvaston's also, Miss Jenks perceiving that her auditors were not inclined for any very lengthened parley, immediately had recourse to her strategic faculties.

"I see you are in a hurry. I suppose bound for the Rectory, to visit that poor child, Lucy: those Northcotes are a strange, sickly set; however, if you have no objection, Miss Effingham, I should like to walk with you to the gate. May I do so?"

"Certainly, if you please," replied Mildred.

"Well, Helen, how did you enjoy the ball? I have not seen you since," asked Miss Jenks.

"Very much, indeed."

"I think it seemed to give general satisfaction, and every one must agree our hostess was uncommonly attentive and hospitable. I always remark one meets with proper courtesy from those persons who boast of gentle blood, and Mrs. Wedderbourne springs from a very ancient Indian family. Poor woman, how she glories in the pomps of this world! I understand, Miss Effingham, she intends to give the *pendant* of last week's fête, when her niece catches a coronet."

"Indeed!"

"Caroline Vincent is a very charming girl, and likely to do exceedingly well. She appears a wonderful favourite with the gentlemen. I thought Sir Gerard Baynton paid her an immense deal of attention. I am sure I watched him stand behind her chair full half an hour, imploring her to eat an ice: for, *entre nous*, caprice is the foible of our little friend. Did you not think he admired her, Miss Campbell?"

"Sir Gerard an admirer of Caroline Vincent! no, certainly not," promptly responded Miss Effingham, quickening her pace.

"Perhaps, then, he found *les beaux yeux de sa cassette* more inviting than the young lady's own. Miss Vincent is no great favourite of yours, I presume, from your tone, Miss Effingham?" pursued Miss Jenks; revolving in her mind, how she should turn Mildred's expected admission of the fact, into a stepping-stone for further prying.

"I hope you have received pleasant news lately from your relatives in Ireland, and from the bride, Lady O'Lawlor," interrupted Helen adroitly, as Mildred turned a deaf ear to Miss Jenks's query.

"Thank you, Miss Campbell, my tidings are very good indeed. Such an unclouded honeymoon as my dear Arabella's seldom falls to a girl's

lot—such a perfect unison of hearts!" said Miss Jenks, maliciously glancing at Mildred.

"I fear we have taken you very much out of your way, Miss Jenks," observed Helen, as, greatly to her delight, they now stood before the door leading into the Rectory garden.

"Oh, pray do not mention such a thing. By-the-bye, did you know, Miss Effingham, that the ——— Dragoons left Stanmore yesterday? There was such a lamentation in the town; for, really, they were a fine, orderly set of fellows. I went to the Queen's Head to see the regiment pass, and was really grieved to take leave of that noble, handsome Colonel Sutherland. I hope he may be happy with his bride elect: though I must say it was very shabby of him to deceive us all so long. Good-morning, young ladies, I won't detain you longer. Miss Effingham, I shall be sure to secure a good place in the church, to witness a certain happy event next week. Pray, make my respectful compliments to her ladyship," and Miss Jenks very reluctantly wended her steps towards the village.

Mildred and Helen exchanged glances only; for at the noise of the falling latch, Mr. Northcote, who was amusing himself with clipping trees in the adjoining shrubbery, came forward to greet

them. Mildred laughingly rallied him on his known propensity—often very much to good Mrs. Northcote's intense dismay—of vigorously slashing away with his knife *à tort et à travers*, lopping off boughs by dozens, on the very spot where it was intended they should form a leafy covert to some unsightly wall or disagreeable object; and then, leaving the worthy Rector to the enjoyment of his favourite amusement, she proceeded with Helen to the sitting-room, where they found Mrs. Northcote.

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CHAPTER XIII.

THE sun rose brightly on Mildred's bridal morn. The flowers and leaves, mellowed in the soft, warm light, lay with expanded petals glistening and exhaling forth rich perfume on the parterres round the mansion. Beyond, the park stretched far as the eye could range, fresh, verdant, and chequered here and there with broad fantastic shadows, cast by stately avenues of chestnut and oak trees ; under which countless starry dewdrops still lingered, sparkling ever and anon in the sunbeam, as the light breeze swayed the branches to and fro. Within the mansion, however, all was bustle and excitement. Smiling soubrettes tripped hastily along the corridors, each intent on her lady's toilette, and almost at her wit's end, as carriage after carriage drove up and set down at the porch ; for the hour fixed for the ceremony was an early one, the Earl having arranged to take his

bride at once to Amesbury, and Mildred wishing for a delay of a few hours, before setting off on her journey. Lord Alresford also had made it his especial request, that the ceremony might be performed in the most private manner consistent with the rank of the bride; a desire too consonant with poor Mildred's feelings not to meet with her hearty concurrence. The invitations, therefore, were limited to her nearest connections (who were requested to meet at the Priory the day previously), and the families of the young ladies asked to officiate as bridesmaids.

Soon after the company assembled, Helen, arrayed in her very becoming bridesmaid's costume, entered Mildred's dressing-room, looking fresh and fair as a rose bathed in dewdrops, with the blush raised by Sir Gerard's whispered commendation still glowing on her cheek. Lady Elvaston had just quitted her daughter; for from very early dawn both she and Helen met by Mildred's pillow: nor had the watchful mother since suffered her to remain a moment alone. When Helen appeared, Miss Effingham was standing motionless before a tall pier-glass, whilst Aglaë added the last touches to her *recherche* toilette. She was pale, though composed: and, unresistingly, suffered the delighted Aglaë to exert her fancy,

without remark or remonstrance. She stood with her back to Helen; and the soft, rich folds of her veil drooped from her wreath of orange flowers almost to the ground. She hastily turned and smiled: yet there was a quick glistening moisture in her full, dark eye when she returned Helen's embrace. Proudly, and with throbbing cheek, Helen gazed on her: she felt few hearts could long resist beauty such as Mildred's: and we know she never quite despaired of the Earl.

"Dear Mildred, how well you look!" said Helen, in tones of unfeigned admiration, as she took from Aglaë's hand the rich jewel destined to loop up the lace round Miss Effingham's slender throat, and attached it with her own fairy fingers.

"Do I? I am glad you think so, Helen."

"Lord Elvaston will be here to lead you down in a very few minutes, dearest Mildred. Your bridesmaids are arrived, and everybody appears assembled in the saloon; for, when I came up stairs, it was crowded," said Helen, in as gay and unconcerned a tone as she could command; she had been specially enjoined by Lady Elvaston not to utter a syllable likely to endanger Mildred's self-possession.

"What an admirable actress you would make, Helen!" replied Mildred, sadly: "you need not, however, be afraid I shall treat any of you with a scene. I have not so long schooled myself to resignation to fail at this most critical period. One word, Helen: have you spoken to Lord Alresford this morning?"

"Yes: he asked after you most earnestly; nay, even tenderly."

A smile of incredulity passed over Miss Effingham's lovely face.

"Do you remember my lonely musings in the boudoir yesterday evening, Helen?" asked she, turning away.

"I do. But I also remember, Mildred, I heard you distinctly state, in Lord Alresford's presence, that you wished to be alone," replied Helen.

Mildred did not reply, but slowly drew on her gloves.

"Do I look very pale, Helen?" asked she, approaching the mirror again. "I wish it was all over. There is something terrible in the thought of being the object of everybody's observation," said she, quickly, while her lip quivered nervously.

"With the exception, perhaps, of looking a shade paler than ordinary—the recognised privi-

lege of brides you know, Mildred—you appear to me as usual.”

“ I suppose I shall not see dear mamma again until it is all over : her courage is not so great as mine. Hark, Helen ! I think I hear papa’s footstep in the passage. He is coming to fetch me ! ” exclaimed Mildred, her cheek growing whiter still, and her eyes riveted themselves on the door.

“ Courage, dearest Mildred ! ” whispered Helen, as when the door opened, and her much loved and indulgent father appeared, Miss Effingham’s vaunted fortitude seemed on the point of forsaking her. Tears suffused her eyes ; and the hand which Helen clasped, shook nervously. Lord Elvaston’s face expressed great distress, but he wisely refrained from sympathy.

“ Forgive me, dear papa ! I am quite well now, and ready to go. First, however, I wish to say to you, in Helen’s presence, that you have latterly vainly tried to dissuade me from this marriage, which you imagine utterly repugnant to me ; but of my own free will I have persisted in it : indeed, I do not hesitate to assert that my future happiness depends on my this day becoming Lord Alresford’s wife,” said Miss Effingham, in a firm voice, rising. “ Now, papa, kiss me for the last,

last time that I shall wholly and entirely belong to you!" continued she, flinging her arms round her father's neck, and with difficulty suppressing the sobs of anguish which shook her frame.

"God bless you, my darling child! Had I not the firmest trust in Alresford's truth and honour, never would I place your hand in his!" said Lord Elvaston, struggling with his emotion, as he folded his daughter to his bosom.

Mildred then silently placed her arm within her father's, and they descended.

Followed by six blooming bridemaids, Miss Effingham presently entered the saloon where her friends awaited her; and Helen's eyes beamed with joy as she fancied she read pride and approbation in the Earl's glance towards his bride: a conclusion confirmed in her own mind by the warmth of his greeting. She had little time, however, for congratulation; and before she well comprehended how the change of scene was effected, found herself standing behind Mildred in the chancel of the humble village church of Greysdon, with the soothing, cheerful voice of Mr. Northcote sounding pleasantly in her ears. Mildred was still pale; but her tones, though low, were firm and audible. The Earl looked handsome and self-possessed as ever; and Helen, as her eye

encountered the merry glance of Sir Gerard Baynton, smiled also : for, after all, Mildred's wedding was not the lugubrious affair fancy pictured. Soon the marriage service concluded, the bridal train swept from the altar to the vestry, and from the vestry to the carriages at the church-porch ; and Helen, leaning on Sir Gerard's arm, speedily stood by Mildred's side in the self-same saloon they had so recently quitted, listening to the congratulations poured on the bride from the circle of pink, blue, green, and white robed damsels and dames around.

The ensuing *déjeuner* in nothing differed from the routine of wedding breakfasts in general ; which invariably are embarrassing things to the parties most concerned, little edifying to the speech-makers, and wearisome to the remaining guests. Therefore, after thus passing an ordeal of an hour and a half, or more, Mildred was at length permitted to escape with her friend Helen to the retirement of her own apartment.

"So it is now all over, Helen ! For better, for worse, I have given myself to Lord Alresford !" exclaimed she breathlessly, sinking on an ottoman.

"My darling Mildred, may you be happy !" and Helen knelt by her side, and threw her arms

around her; for tears now streamed in torrents down Mildred's fair face.

"Helen, strange and inconsistent as it may appear, I would not, if I could, cancel the vows I have just uttered!" exclaimed Mildred, sweeping the ringlets from her wet cheek. "But I shudder at the very anticipation of all I am going to endure: what long months must elapse before I shall be able to erase from *his* heart the bitter memory of my past folly and caprice—before I can hold that place in his esteem which Lady Catherine Neville does—before he can again confide in me and love me!"

"Be sure he does—he will!" murmured Helen.

"If I should find he still prizes Lady Catherine's society more than mine!" exclaimed Mildred, shudderingly.

"Be comforted, Mildred. Do not conjure up such impossibilities," rejoined Helen, soothingly.

"I hope it may prove so, Helen," said Mildred, rising, and wandering round the room. "How desolate everything looks!" added she, with a sigh, as she missed many familiar trifles, and her eye glanced from the disordered toilette at the open imperial on the floor. "As soon, Helen, as I receive permission from the Earl, I shall immediately write to you to fly to me; and then,

"I think together, we will contrive to make even Amesbury comfortable," continued she, restlessly pursuing her wanderings.

"Yes; what joy it will be to meet again, dear Mildred!" replied Helen, as the pendule over the chimney struck two.

Mildred started; for the minutes were fast flying towards the hour when she was to bid farewell to the home of her childhood.

At the same moment Aglaë entered the room, weary of awaiting a summons, to warn her young mistress it was high time to make the requisite alterations in her attire—to exchange her bridal for her travelling costume. When this was effected, Mildred repaired to her mother's dressing-room; Helen remained where she was, feeling too great a weight on her spirits to join the gay party assembled on the lawn below.

In about three-quarters of an hour Lord Alresford's travelling carriage drove up, and presently the Earl himself made his appearance in the boudoir in quest of his bride. Ere Helen had time to account for her friend's absence, Lord and Lady Elvaston and their daughter entered the apartment. Mildred leant on her father's arm, and though her veil was down, Helen's quick eye discerned traces of tears on her cheek. Lady Elvaston wept; but

insensibly a smile beamed over her gentle features, as she listened eagerly to a few rapid words from the Earl's lips, as they followed together down stairs. Mildred exchanged hasty greetings with the numerous guests in the hall and vestibule as she passed, and again pressing her lips to her mother's and Helen's cheeks, she sprang into the carriage—one brief glance at the hurried, anxious faces of the dear ones she was leaving behind, and Lady Alresford was whirled away.

Sunk back in the corner of the carriage, and feeling too miserable to be capable of the slightest effort, it was some very considerable time before Mildred ventured to raise her eyes to her companion. She then perceived that his eyes were riveted upon her, and uncomfortably conscious how very indifferently she was enacting her rôle of bride, she blushed and turned away her head. A smile parted the Earl's lips—one of those smiles which had so captivated Helen on the day of her first introduction.

"I have been watching the expression of your countenance for the last half hour, Mildred. You are looking and also feeling, I have no doubt, very forlorn and aggrieved," said he at length, taking one of her small hands in his.

This was said in a tone of such genuine kind-

ness, that tears unconsciously trembled in her eyes; but she could not deny the fact. Ah, had she then but courageously and candidly avowed it, and its cause! As it was, she suffered the Earl to retain her hand, and simply replied,—

“I shall be better soon—very soon.”

With a degree of consideration that touched her heart, Lord Alresford then spoke of the dear relatives she had left behind; and, relieved by being able to give utterance to the regrets which tortured her, she felt a burden removed from her spirits. Insensibly, the Earl led the conversation into other channels, and such was the fascination of his manner, the extent of his information, and his evident desire to please her, that Mildred found herself at length sitting in earnest discourse; her beautiful face radiant with smiles, her bright eyes beaming, and feeling more at ease than she deemed it possible a few hours ago.

Twilight was fast blending all things in her soft mysterious shadows, when Lord Alresford's equipage passed the lodges of the grand entrance to Amesbury Park. Mildred felt her spirits sink again as they swiftly approached the mansion, now whirling along gloomy avenues of trees, whose towering branches, intertwined and arched, excluded all but the feeblest gleams of twilight; now

emerging again into the dim expanse of park, while here and there clumps of tall trees, like shadowy ghosts, flitted past the carriage windows, shrouded in the gathering obscurity. Lord Alresford, likewise, was silent: while Mildred's heart beat rapidly, and almost audibly, as the carriage at length stopped before the door of the mansion. The Earl handed her out, and in another second she stood under the roof of her new home.

Dinner, which was served almost immediately, passed off with less restraint than Mildred once would have declared probable; and some two hours after their arrival, the Earl and his bride were seated *tête-à-tête*, in a large, well lighted room with a conservatory adjoining. For some short period, conversation was tolerably well sustained on Mildred's part. Insensibly, however, her spirits began to flag; and her thoughts reverted to her home, and the friends from whom she had so recently parted. Her eyes roamed slowly round the splendidly furnished apartment, and then imagination pictured the drawing-room at the Priory, and its inmates: she thought of her much loved mother, of her father, of Helen, till tears sprang to her eyes; and, completely overpowered, she hastily pushed back her *fauteuil*, and strolled into the conservatory: unobservant of Lord Alres-

ford, who stood with his arm on the chimney-piece opposite to her chair, silently watching the progress of her reverie. The fresh fragrance and beauty of the plants around soon revived her spirits, and she had scarce paced the length of the conservatory before she became sensible that her sudden silence and flight, without word or excuse, were not likely to receive a courteous construction from the fastidious Earl; hurriedly, therefore, she retraced her steps: but Lord Alresford was no longer in the saloon. She advanced, and stood motionless on the hearth-rug for a few minutes; but still the Earl came not again. Glancing anxiously around, her eye presently fell on a letter placed on a small table near the chair from which she had risen. Mildred took it up—it was addressed, in the Earl's hand, to the Countess of Alresford. The few letters which had lately passed between them had caused her such exquisite pain, that she almost shuddered as she tore open the envelope.

It ran thus:—

“MY DEAR MILDRED,

“When I insisted on the immediate celebration of our marriage, it was not with the intent of tyrannizing over your feelings, or of forcing

you into the arms of a husband whom your heart repulses. Your own free, spontaneous act reconfirmed our engagement; and, confiding in your positive assertions that the past of which I had to complain was but a fleeting fancy—the caprice of a day—I trusted that you would not have taken this important step without serious commune with your own heart, or without feeling a certainty that you could eventually bestow your affection, where you again deliberately pledged your hand. Unhappily, these hopes have not been realized. I have not been able to inspire you with that love and confidence which can alone hallow the near and indissoluble tie that now unites us: at least, I can only so interpret the marked avoidance and alienation you evince. Until your heart, therefore, Mildred, truthfully confirms the solemn vow you have this day uttered, regard me only as your best friend, and brother. The only return I at present exact or require from you, is your full and unreserved confidence.”

The paper dropped from Mildred’s hands. The Earl refused, then, to acknowledge her as his wife; and cruelly threw all the blame on her! For a moment she stood absorbed in silent, bitter reverie. She then stooped, and hastily took up

the letter from the floor, and once more read it through: presently she hid her fair face in her hands, and wept. Could she not retaliate the charge of daily alienation? Had he ever given her reason to suppose that he had thoroughly forgiven her inconstancy during his absence abroad? Had he even deigned to explain to her, his betrothed, the exact degree of his intimacy with the much-lauded Lady Catherine? or, had he attempted to probe her feelings respecting himself? And now, the conviction of his indifference fell like a bolt of ice on poor Mildred's heart; for she was beginning to be too familiar with the torment of suspicion to believe it possible that, when a word would terminate suspense, such word should long remain unasked.

She was at length aroused from her painful reverie by the entrance of Aglaë. The *soubrette* made a kind of little affected start when she perceived the solitude of her mistress; but, restrained by the sadness of Mildred's face and manner, she repressed for the moment her flow of volubility: which, nevertheless, burst forth with redoubled energy, some half-hour afterwards.

Lady Alresford was, however, in no mood to encourage her loquacity, and briefly responded in monosyllables.

Aglaë heaved a deep sigh.

“ Mais, par exemple, c’est la plus drôle de noce that I have ever seen !” exclaimed she, at length, indignantly. “ Voilà madame qui reste toute seule, et monseigneur qui s’enferme dans son cabinet ! C’est assez à faire mourir de chagrin ! I wonder what Milédi Elvaston and Miss Helène would say.”

Mildred made no reply ; and after Aglaë had grumbled and fidgeted through the usual routine of her evening’s duty, she quietly dismissed her.

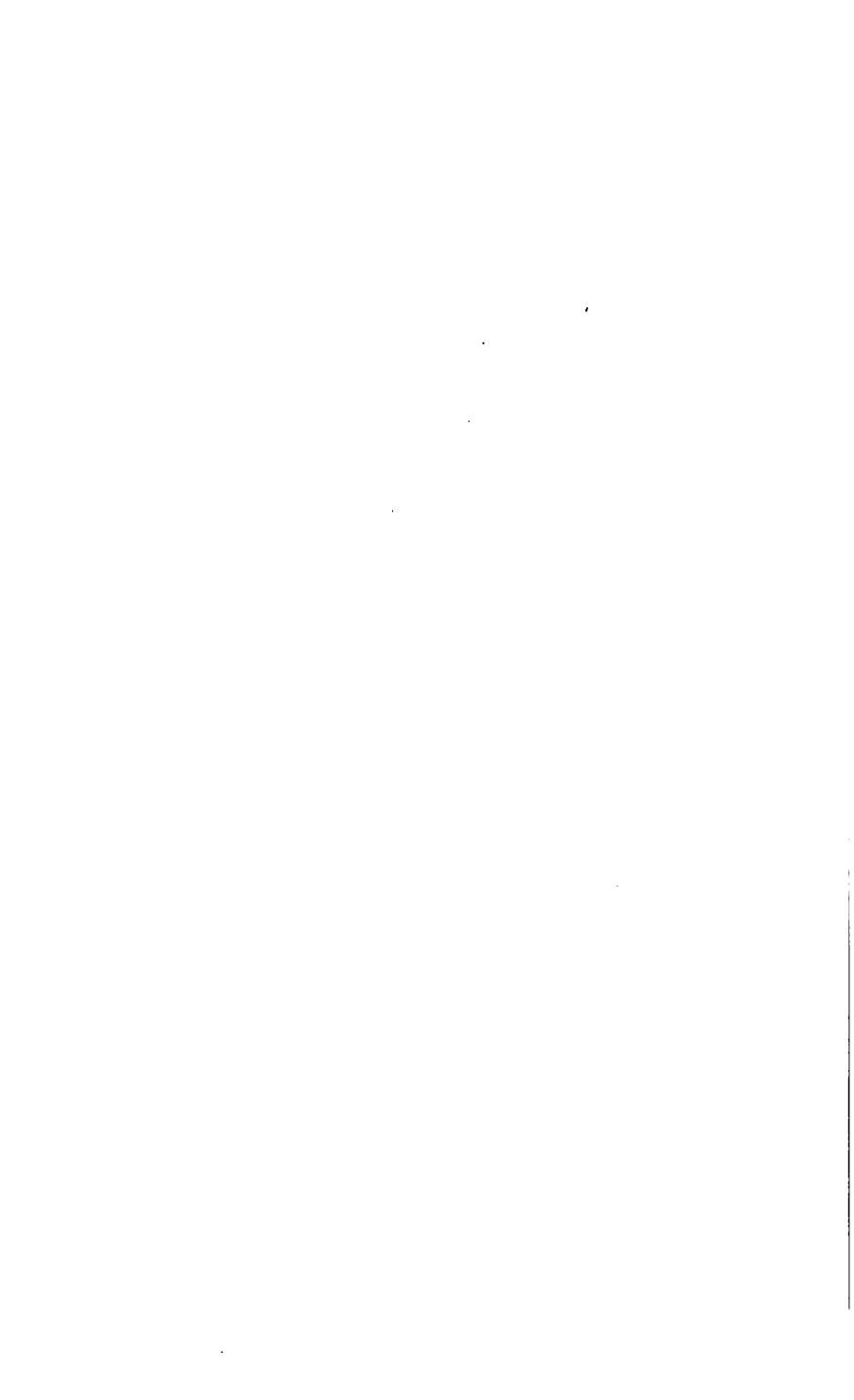
As soon as her maid closed the door, Mildred threw herself back in her chair, and was presently buried in thought.

After a time she arose and gazed round the large lonely apartment ; feeling more desolate than she had ever done in her life. She then approached the window, and, pushing aside the heavy velvet curtain, threw up the sash, with the somewhat comforting assurance that she would at least find a familiar friend in the sweet night breeze which fanned her cheek, and gently waved the fresh boughs and grass. The plaintive notes of the nightingale sounded from the thick covert of a neighbouring grove, mingling at times with the shrill bark of foxes, and the lowing of cattle. With her head resting on her hand, there she

remained motionless, absorbed in meditation, till the soft gray twilight gradually rolled away, and vanished before the opening dawn.

So ended Mildred Effingham's bridal day.

END OF VOL. I.





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